

Disclaimer – I do not profess to own the Harry Potter universe. The title of this story was inspired by the Jethro Tull song “Bungle in the Jungle.” It is not a songfic! I also do not own the rights to that wonderful song.

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## Chapter 1 – Five Minutes to Live

Date: September 1, 1996 12:00 PM Local time

What would you do, if you only had five minutes to live? It is an interesting question to ask another person, is it not? The people you ask would surely give a wide variety of answers. It is possible that the most common answer would be ‘surround myself with loved ones, family and friends so that you can say a final goodbye’. That seems like a satisfactory answer, doesn’t it? What if you had no loved ones though? What if your parents had been torn from you before you were old enough to recall them? What if you were left with people that you were related to, but who did not care if you lived or died? In fact, they might prefer that you died. Would that bother you? Perhaps? Perhaps not?

So clearly longing for family isn’t a priority, so lets exam loved ones. When you consider that you are only sixteen, there hasn’t been a whole lot of time to accumulate a number of ‘loved ones’. You’ve been on exactly one date. It didn’t really go that well as you recall. You had another girl that you were quite smitten with early in the summer, but we will cover that disaster momentarily. She doesn’t count, well at least not anymore. You may have had other opportunities that you never even realized, but lack of a proper upbringing and various distractions kept you from capitalizing on said opportunities. Besides, your life is, well strange doesn’t quite describe it adequately, bizarre gives it a comical aspect that certainly doesn’t exist. If forced to describe your life you would have to say that there is a great deal of boredom, long periods of uncertainty, and intermittent bursts of sheer absolute terror. What more could a potential love interest want? Yet despite all this joy and laughter obviously surrounding you, you are accused of being moody and brooding. You

had a godfather. He shined down on your life like a brief ray of light on an otherwise gloomy day. He's gone now. He was killed during one of those moments of absolute terror that occur all too often in your life. The list of people that had a hand in his death in some way shape or form sounds like a who's who in Wizarding Britain. They read his will and had a nice service for him. At least they told you it was a nice service, you don't get out all that much. He left you more money to go in a bank that you can never get too and some nice properties. At least they are supposed to be nice. You usually stay at one of the not-so nice properties.

Okay, that pretty much eliminates both family and lovers. All that is left is friends. Everyone has friends don't they? Best mates? People willing to stand by your side no matter what? You started this summer with what you thought were a whole bunch of friends. What you actually had were 'handlers' and people willing to use you for what they deemed was the 'greater good'. What's so wrong with the 'lesser good'? You've got a vault full of money, but it's been 'too dangerous' to visit since your third year. Someone else does your shopping for you, because shopping is every bit as dangerous as banking. How much money do you have anyway? Aren't banks supposed to give you a statement periodically? Given that the majority of those moments of terror happen around the end of your school year, why isn't going to school ranked higher than shopping or banking on the dangerous activities list? You often wonder if the school nurse knows her husband's body better than yours, with the amount of time the two of you spend together. It's a small wonder that the two of you have never been romantically linked!

You've strayed from the topic now haven't you? Where were you? Friends! That was it! You've still managed to keep a couple even through all this. One of them is right here with you now. The other is back in London, hopefully still raising hell. They are good people. The one here is much older than you at least in years. There is an old muggle saying that 'it is not the years – but the mileage'. That seems to apply here now doesn't it? So there is one friend you won't be able to say goodbye to. The other will likely be joining you on your trip to the next great adventure. (This implies that you have already had a great adventure. Maybe someone there will explain when exactly that occurred and how it qualified as great?) You hope he does not

though, he has all those friends, family and loved ones that seem to be lacking in your life. He does tell good stories though, so if he does become a traveling companion on the road to the afterlife at least there will be entertainment. Then there is an absolutely barmy house elf. He'll probably take this the hardest. Hope he doesn't beat himself up too much – literally. Your last friend is an owl. You'll miss her the most. There wasn't time for a proper goodbye, but you are comforted with the fact that everyone loves that owl. She will be well taken care of, so that's good.

Well that covers a 'typical' answer to how someone would like to spend their last five minutes. When has your life been typical though? So instead of a comfortable bed surrounded by people who care and maybe a nice bowl of your favorite ice cream, you have to settle for eight goblins, two jungle trolls and five other wizards on a fool's errand, which will most likely end in everyone's death. Well actually right now it's eight mice, two very large dogs, four cats and an eagle. Silly isn't it? You wouldn't mind throttling the person who came up with this idiotic plan, until you recall that you came up with this crackpot scheme. Perhaps you should eat a lemon drop? That's what he would recommend. You have several anatomical suggestions where he could stick those lemon drops, but that would ruin their taste.

Pausing for a moment, you think of all your other classmates at good old Hoggy Hogwarts. Every so often, public opinion shifts for or against you. One minute they are pointing and whispering at you in the hallways, the next they are all chummy and 'hey we never really believed that rubbish about you'. That lasts until the next school crisis that will inevitably cause the shift again. 'It's ironic,' you think. 'With the time difference, everyone should be scurrying from their train to their little feast right about now.' You ponder what the hat might say if it could see you know. Would your plan be considered worthy of a Ravenclaw? Cunning like a Slytherin? Foolish like a Gryffindor? Sorry Helga can't really come up with a reason to include you this time. Maybe this year the forbidden forest isn't actually forbidden? Strange because you ended up in there every year so far. You left some hair behind – wonder if they took you up on that? Perhaps, loud annoying jealous male ex-best friend is going to be rooming with Miss 'Don't you dare say my first name!' until they give up on you ever coming

back. Would people notice that you had suddenly become so clumsy?

You hate most forms of magical travel and this apparently is no exception. Since this method was not meant to for higher thinking beings, there was no thought given to creature comforts. Flying is nice though. A good broom, a hippogriff or even a thestral are all great ways to get around. Why did they ban magic carpets in Britain anyway? You had a real nice broom. It was a gift from your godfather. Like your owl there really wasn't time to take it with you. You suppose one of your so-called friends will put it to use - either the loud one or the pretend girlfriend. It doesn't really matter though. You focus on these thoughts trying to avoid thinking about how very unsettling this method of travel is. At least you are used to being uncomfortable. That term practically describes your life from age two on. You wonder if Vernon would one day try and take credit for 'toughening the little bugger up'.

Well at least the trip is over. That won't ever happen again, you hope. The clock is officially ticking on your five minutes to live. Fortunately the bubblehead charm stayed with you when you returned to your human form. This was good for two reasons; one there was no real idea how 'good' the air actually was here and two this wizarding city carved into the side of a mountain, well its full of dead things, so the smell might not be so delightful.

So there you are, in the middle of what used to be a Wizarding Bank in South America. A quick look around tells you that there sure are lots of dead things shuffling around. They are now starting to shuffle towards you, but you're a wizard now aren't you? Wizards have ways of dealing with the walking dead. Fire is supposed to work really well, but there is that pesky problem with the air around here. That's a last resort. Standard offensive spells work well, but there are a whole lot of them here and it seems like more are arriving by the second. So what is a clever wizard to do in this case? Shotgun -yes, a shotgun! Specifically a Mossberg 590 that you have spent the last 3 days trying to master. They originally tried to have you use an AK 47, but that didn't really go so well did it? The youngest seeker in a century couldn't seem to master changing magazines and burned through ammo like nobody's business. Shotguns are nice though especially

after they showed you how to hold it so you don't get a monster bruise on your chest and shoulder. The weight reduction enchantment makes it much more manageable. It has nine rounds in it, kind of like carrying nine little reducers around with you. Throw in a bit of magic tied to that ammo box at your feet and it's more like carrying one hundred and fifty nine reductor curses with you. Harry's got a gun. Harry's got a gun. Whole lot of inferi come.

As you start firing and pumping the next rounds into the action, you are struck by the irony that if this was happening in England, your friends hen-pecked muggle object infatuated father would have to arrest you for 'misuse of a muggle artifact'. You could argue that you were using it for its intended use and that the magic is actually allowing it to perform at a higher level. How would that qualify as misuse? Creative use, effective use or innovative use maybe, you could understand that. The weapon makes absolutely no noise at all when it is firing. Magic is a wonderful thing isn't it? You don't stop to admire your handiwork. It does rather remind you of that Doom 2 game your cousin would endlessly play on his computer. Too bad you don't have the chaingun. That would be sweet!

The transformations are wearing off and the others are attacking now. The trolls are using large spiky clubs. Now with new and improved larger spiky things! The goblins are using modified nine millimeter pistols that they hold like rifles in their tiny hands. You take a moment to ponder the goblins as a race. They are abused, belittled, mistreated and expected to never rise above their station in life. Basically they are you. No wonder you like them! Despite how much that boring ghost drones on about them, wizards don't understand why ever fifty or so years the oppressed rise up and attempt to throw off the yokes of their so called masters. It strikes a familiar chord in you and you appreciate them on an instinctive level. Not that their table manners are any good though, but you are beginning to wonder if James and Lily couldn't have children, so they took a baby goblin and transfigured him. If you didn't already know better, you might suspect that you are a goblin whose animagus form is a human wizard. Everyone got a good laugh, when the ancient goblin who helped organize this shindig told you what goblin name they gave you – 'Green eyed scarhead'. Malfoy calls you that all the time, maybe he's a goblin too?

Wow! Thinking about Malfoy while you are blasting away with a shotgun. Coincidence? You don't think so. Every one of these soulless husks should have his little slick backed hair look and superior smirk on. It would make destroying them that much easier. Oh shit! You really didn't need to see that. The one whose head you just blew open, she couldn't have been ten years old! This stinks! To make matters worse, you don't seem to be really making any headway – even with all this firepower. You are trying to help clear a path for the two jungle trolls to get to the entrance where they can bar the door. They haven't managed to get very far!

Jungle trolls are only about twice your size. They are however smarter than the mountain trolls you are used to back in England. Hack is the one on the left and Glurg is the one on the right. You get along better with Hack. Glurg has a hyena like laugh that really gets on your nerves. You spent about twenty minutes the other day playing rock, scissors and paper with Hack. He usually picks rock, though he was mixing it fairly well at the end. You regret all those times you called Crabbe and Goyle trolls, because Hack is actually fun. Plus it is rather insulting to trolls in general.

A minute has gone by and Glurg goes down. Buried beneath a mass of walking flesh. Shit! You try to move forward and blow some of them off giving the troll a chance. Two of the goblins try and help. Glurg is a lost cause. The only thing good about it is that his blood will probably attract the inferi that were advancing towards you. You shift your focus from Glurg to help get Hack moving forward. He had been moving along what used to be the teller counter; it had been protecting his whole left side. You watch him take long exhausting swings with his club, as you struggle to protect his flank. Damn! Both the goblins who were working with you are gone now. You hop on the counter to take the high ground and keep firing as their lifeless arms reach out to you.

“Don't stop Hack!” You shout, but the bubblehead charm muffles your voice. You keep pumping round after round into the chamber. A quick glance shows that the hitwizards using the AK-47s have already emptied their magazines and started firing off their magic.

Two and a half minutes have gone by and things are getting desperate. Two more goblins are down and Glurg has stopped moving altogether. You're the only human still firing a weapon. Everyone else is using their wands. Magic use seems like it is turning the tide, but they will wear out quickly though and the dead have a way of soaking up spell damage. The female cursebreaker panics and tries to use fire against them. Thankfully, you all don't blow up. Everyone was worried about 'methane buildup'. Unfortunately, these inferi did not get the memo that fire is supposed to drive them away. You've moved slightly ahead of Hack to try and distract the inferi impeding his progress. It's working, but now you are dodging more and more hands trying to pull you down. Thank the powers that be for all that quidditch training and all the grueling physical training with your hitwizard friends.

After another minute goes by you pull the trigger on the Mossberg and nothing happens. Your heart sinks. There is at least twenty more feet to go. No way Hack can make it to the door, damn Gringotts and their doors. Can't just use a colloportus and shut them, no siree! Doors are warded against spells. Have to be shut manually. Oh well, at least when you see your parents and your godfather, you can say you went down fighting.

With that chipper though in your head, you discard the shotgun and pull out your eleven inch holly wand with phoenix feather core - useful in a wide range of magic and stalemating Dark Lords. You begin casting as fast as you can. Most of the curses you are using, you didn't know them two months ago. What a difference two months makes! You are also doing something else not taught at the so called 'finest magical institution in all of Europe', spellchaining. Wonder if Drumstrang or Beauxbatons teach it?

Spellchaining at its heart is casting a series of spells whose wand movements flow into the next spell. Hopefully the aurors at least get taught this! You cut down on your casting time. Like the shotgun, spellchaining's success relies on rate of fire. If you shave a half second off of a spell and it takes three seconds to cast an average spell, well in thirty seconds instead of casting just ten spells, you've cast about twelve. Those extra two spells could be the difference between life and death. You also learn the spells in different

languages. This allows you to shave off a syllable here and there and now instead of twelve you might be at fourteen spells in thirty seconds. Different chains are used for different purposes. You are currently using your most destructive chain. Its five spells repeated over and over. None of them are defensive spells.

You feel the surge of your magic as it flows through your body. Bone crusher, cutter, reductor, banisher, a second cutter and then back to bone crusher. The hands reaching for you are gone. Quickly, you begin clearing the way for the beleaguered troll.

'Faster Hack', you think as your wand motions blur repeating the chain over and over. You sink into the zone of spellchaining. The flow of magic brings with it an incredible rush. It is euphoric in a way, but you'll wear out soon. It will be sudden and catastrophic. You will collapse in magical exhaustion. You pump as much as you can into your spells. Do you notice that your reductor curse blows through the head of two inferi? Do you care that the second cutter is doing far more damage than you thought possible? Do you even notice the aura of power you are exuding as you plow the way clear for Hack? No, you do not. The only thing that matters is that the troll make it to the door. Everything depends on the troll making the door! Your banisher blows three inferi backwards. You've reached the end of the counter. Hack passes you, bloodied and determined. You leap down behind him and keep cursing. You have lost track of your number of links – each time you begin the chain again you make a new link. Hack struggles up the steps, his club not moving near as fast as it was in the beginning. You concentrate on removing the obstacles in front of him and protecting him from the corpses in the lobby as he tries to clear the doorway. How long have you been at this now? He's got one door shut! You can see darkness gathering at the edge of your vision. It won't be long now. You drop to one knee behind the troll and spin casting your banisher between Hack's legs. He slams the second door shut and drops the siege bar across it. You keep firing as the darkness grows. The muted pounding of dead hands on the bank door have a hypnotic quality to it. You should give up now. Hack will understand. The rest will too. Your arm feels limp; you teeter on the one knee and fall to the cold stone. Still you manage to cast another complete link. The only thing keeping your wand in your hand is that your hand won't open to drop it. It is over now. Your eyes



may be open, but all you can see now is darkness. Will they be happy to see you, or will they scold you for failure? It doesn't matter you'll know soon enough. You start to hear voices faintly in the distance. It reminds you of the arch at the Department of Mysteries. You can't make out everything they are saying.

"...fucking believe that!"

"...a visible aura! Never seen..."

"Help me move him. He needs ..."

"...wand's so hot it burnt my damn hand! Must be fused to his skin! Get the burn cream out of the kit!"

You feel cool liquid in your mouth. Damn! Apparently the afterlife uses nasty tasting potions as well.

"Not too much! He'll choke!"

Hands move you. You are propped up against a wall. More of that disgusting potion is forced into your mouth. Rather rude? You slip away into darkness again.

Much later, it starts to get clearer again. You can see blurry shapes again. Your arms feel like lead, but they move a little bit. Lips move and you try to ask a polite question, 'Excuse me, would one of you please tell me what is transpiring?' Instead you hear yourself moan. It sounds rather girly too! That's embarrassing. One of the blurry shapes moves closer. You see a bit of a face and red hair.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Harry." The redhead says.

"Ron, don't wanna get up – too tired. No quidditch. Not today!" You grumble.

"It's not Ron, Harry. It's me Bill." He says with a gentle tone. He mumbles something else to the other blurry shapes that sounds like 'dazed' and 'out of it'.

“That’s right.” You mumble as a couple of coherent thoughts come together in your mind. “Ron’s a no good backstabbing traitor. Sorry Bill.”

“S’okay Harry. Just sit back and relax.”

“Five more minutes – just give me five more minutes.” You mumble before darkness descends again. With the exception of four goblins, whose names you never got to know and a particularly annoying jungle troll named Glurg, you sink back with the knowledge that everyone else has at least five more minutes to live.

Author’s notes – Don’t like the writing style then this story isn’t for you. The story will be told from this perspective. I like trying different things and this is what I am trying out right now. The next chapters will take us back to early July to figure out how Harry ended up here instead of Hogwarts on September 1, 1996. Special thanks to Nukular Winter for the firearms advice.

Disclaimer – Still applicable from Chapter 1

## Chapter 2 – Walking Through Forests

Date: July 1, 1996 (Two months prior to Chapter 1 or at least that is what you think.)

“Oh you’re waking up! Harry? Harry, are you okay?” You hear a voice. It’s late afternoon at the Burrow. The sun is low in the sky. You really hate the color orange.

“Uh? What happened?” Too many times in your young life you have woken up uncertain of how you got somewhere.

“Just relax, sweetypie. You took a tumble off your broom. Does your head hurt?” You identify the voice. It belongs to Ginny Weasley, best mate’s sister. You like her don’t you? She has beautiful eyes and the cutest little freckles. Up until recently, you didn’t really care for freckles, but on Ginny it works. Her hair is so soft. It just begs to be touched doesn’t it? You shouldn’t. Best mate won’t like it. He has big time fit anytime someone is interested in little sis. Her mouth is moving. Her lips are very pretty. They look so moist. You should probably be focusing on what she is saying though.

“I said. ‘Harry, what is the last thing you remember?’” Even when she is perturbed, she is kind of cute.

“Coming to the Burrow?”

“Wow that was four days ago! You must have hit pretty hard. Does it hurt pumpkin?”

“It throbs a bit.” You say wondering why you are now ‘sweetypie’ and ‘pumpkin’. If anyone were to be referred to as a food product, it should be Ron and most likely by other best mate, not by sister.

“I’ll go get an ice pack and let mum know you’re awake.” She leans over and kisses you. This is heaven! She likes you too! Even after all that time you ignored her while she humiliated herself around you. Her lips taste like strawberries. Much less salty than a Cho kiss.

Much less on the cheek than a Hermione kiss. Much more on the lips like a ...

“Ginny! You just kissed me! What’s going on?” It was wonderful, but you are confused.

“I thought you were joking. You really don’t remember anything from when you got here?”

You’re embarrassed for some reason. “Err, yeah sorry.” Smooth Potter – very smooth!

She leans closer again. You are getting more embarrassed by each passing second. She breathes hot air on your neck giving you goosebumps. She moves up to your ear and whispers in a very husky voice, “You mean that you don’t remember telling me that you fancy me? That you haven’t been able to stop thinking about me? That we should be going out together?”

Your embarrassment has now reached epic proportions as parts of your body begin responding to best mate’s sister. Bad Harry! No thinky about Ginny like that! Must find way to buy time. Must find way to explain if best mate walks in. Must find way to kiss soft lips again. What!

“Wait! Ginny what about Ron?”

“Oh, we told him two days ago. He got all fussy and I told him how it was going to be unless he wanted a case of the ‘bats’. I asked him how it was any different from what he and a certain Ms. Granger have been doing.” As she says this she starts nibbling on the ear she is whispering in. Nibbles are very nice. You sit up and pull her to you. Much better snogging position! Strawberry lips taste better on second helping. You don’t want to do anything else but kiss Ginny Weasley. Wait a second! Ron and Hermione are dating? You reluctantly pull away.

“Wait a second! Ron and Hermione are dating?” You ignore the déjà vu.

“Uh huh.” She leans forward for more strawberry kisses and after a second her tongue follows those wonderful lips. Strawberry kisses with tongue are a significant upgrade from regular strawberry kisses. Michael Corner is a certifiable idiot for leaving incredible lips and tongue! Unless he likes his snacks wet and salty. Oh well his loss!

It amazes you that you wasted time on things like stupid, greasy look at me I am a potion's master's homework, when you could have had this. You would trade anything for this. Well maybe not quidditch. Good thing she plays quidditch. Riding broom and kissing Ginny at the same time. Maybe, that's how broom mishap occurred?

As you continue to tongue wrestle with she who possesses strawberry lips and dexterous tongue you ponder your life. It does seem like a good time to sit back relax and enjoy. Things are much better this summer. You didn't have to stay with your so-called relatives very long. Only one more summer to go and then freedom! Headmaster Dumbledore was a welcome sight. The headmaster took you to find a rather large old man and persuade him to come teach at Hogwart's. Slughorn kind of creeps you out though, but in his defense he hasn't tried to kill you like most of the new teachers of recent history - yet. Though he reminded you a bit of good old Lockhart with the way he seemed fascinated by celebrities. You didn't really care for apparition. It's dead useful, but rather uncomfortable. You feel the same way about potions, but mainly because of the greasy bastard.

Oh dear, the kisses have stopped. She smiles at you and says she had better go downstairs now. You're disappointed, but understand. You watch appreciatively as she saunters out of the room. You're glad Ron can't read minds like Snape. He wouldn't be happy with the thoughts in your head right now. You wonder if he is having the same thoughts when it comes to Hermione? It is still hard to believe isn't it? You would never look at Hermione like that!

Getting dressed is fun. The pants are a bit tight in certain areas. On further consideration, you absolutely had the color orange. What is it with Ron and the Cannons anyway? Does it say something about you that he has such devotion to complete and utter losers? You hope not. One quick trip across the hall to the loo and you are free of hideous orange room. There's a spring in your step as you head down the

stairs. You frown slightly wondering how much the rest of the Weasley family knows about you, Ginny and strawberry flavored kisses. This could present a small problem, you reason. Then again, since Ron already knows and that is pretty much like sending Rita Skeeter an owl, the rest of clan Weasley must know. They must either approve or they are plotting revenge. Perhaps that is how broom mishap really occurred?

Ah the smell of the burrow! There always seems to be something cooking here. Your stomach is grumbling. Not the steady rumble from Ron's pit-that-shall-never-be-filled. Maybe if Ron became a Dark Lord, he would change his name to The Dark Lord Grumblefart. You smile, that's funny! Dean, Seamus, Neville and any male Weasley would definitely agree. Hermione wouldn't think so, but she hasn't shared a room with him. You see Mrs. Weasley. She's more of a mother than your aunt has ever been! Sure enough, she has caught sight of you. Too bad Tom isn't one of her kids, he wouldn't be able to sneak up on her! Oh well, let the fussing commence.

"Harry, honestly, must you fly a broom so dangerously like that dear? You've got to learn some self-control. I'm just glad Ginny was there. Now surely you must be hungry. Ginny is already fixing you a bowl. The rolls will be out of the oven in a minute. Go on eat up. You need your strength." Her gentle scolding is almost music to your ears.

"Where's Ron?" You ask.

"Oh dear. Ginny said you were having problems with your memory. I should probably floo Poppy. I'm sorry but Ron left yesterday to spend a few days with Fred and George before going to that Chudley Cannon's quidditch camp." Darn Ron is going to quidditch camp! You picture his face practically beaming in joy. You wouldn't have minded going, but being with Ginny is much better. It is sad to admit, but even better with no overprotective brother around. Opportunities for mischief abound!

"Please Mrs. Weasley, don't. I'm okay. I'm sure in time it will come back to me. Right now it's just fuzzy. I don't know what I did on my broom, but I'll try not to do it again?"

Ginny supplies some much needed information. "You were just too excited to get your broom back and have that ban lifted. I just couldn't keep up on my old thing." The tone of her voice is disappointed. You should fix that. Are you a boyfriend or a git?

"Maybe, we should fix that next time we get to the alley?" You say watching her eyes suddenly sparkle. You brace for Mrs. Weasley's reply.

"Ginny ... " she starts.

You cut her off. Strawberry tongued, flying goddess will have new broom! "Mrs. Weasley, Ginny means so much to me. I need to do this for her. She put up with years of me acting like a complete fool. Plus, it's not just for her, but the whole team. We need to defend the cup this year and having Ginny on a slower broom is a handicap. It doesn't have to be a firebolt, Nimbus 2000's or 2001's are great chaser brooms. The Cleansweeps and Comets are better for keepers and beaters."

You see a few unreadable emotions on Molly Weasley's face. You certainly have more emotional depth than a teaspoon, perhaps a crockpot, but obviously reading the female mind is beyond you. In truth it was only seconds of anticipation, but it feels like a few minutes go by.

"Well, I suppose as long as you shop for a good deal and Ginny promises to keep her grades up. It does my heart good to see the two of you together. I just don't want the two of you letting your schoolwork slip."

"Don't worry mum! I am sure Hermione will keep us in line!" She leaps in to your arm and gives you a quick kiss. You squeeze her waist and whisper that you'll just have to find a good deal on a firebolt for her. Her smile is worth all the galleons in your vault! Did she just squeeze your bum! She did and in the same room as her own mum! Harry Potter just got groped! That will make a patronus or two!

“What am I doing now?” Hermione Granger says coming into the room. “Good to see you upright again Harry! Let’s try just a bit longer this time.”

Bushy haired female best friend gives you hug. You hug back and feel a bit uncomfortable. Ms. Granger has a few curves of her own. Good thing no one else is a mind reader here. Say something. You were just saying that you would never look at Hermione like that. Now, you are looking at Hermione like that. Ginny doesn’t deserve you.

“I probably already said this, but it is good to see you Hermione. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine Harry. I still get a little tired, but Madame Pomfrey worked with some specialists at St. Mungos and developed an ointment that will get rid of the scar. It’s almost gone already. At least I am off all those potions! Thank Merlin!”

After a moment she continues. You try really hard to not notice her chest swelling as she takes a big breath. Embarrassed, you take a moment to study the Weasley family clock. Remarkable craftsmanship, isn’t it? All the hands are on ‘Mortal Peril’ except Percy’s, which is on ‘lost’. He’s an idiot for turning his back on this wonderful family. Hard to believe he was once a Head Boy at Hogwarts. Okay, you are calm again. How about you try talking to your best female friend without staring at what Fred and George refer to as her ‘funbags’? Make sure to use a safe topic.

“Did we get our OWLs in yet?” You ask congratulating yourself. Not only did you pick a safe topic, but one you aren’t really interested in. Hermione is a wonderful girl, but she is as obsessed with achievement as Ron is with eating or quidditch.

“No. We probably won’t get them until the end of the month. I still keep thinking about appealing the Astronomy OWL regardless of what I scored. Seriously, Umbridge had her goons attacking Hagrid and our head of house at the time. How in Merlin’s name were we supposed to take that exam?”



Pleased with your question and confident that the next twenty minutes will be filled with useless babble, you settle into a chair at the table where Ginny already has a hearty steaming bowl of stew waiting for you. You smile at her and say thanks, while listening to Hermione talk about different possible retesting scenarios. You don't really want to take the Astronomy OWL over again. The centaurs taught you pretty much all you need to know. Mars is bright tonight, tomorrow and every night for the foreseeable future. Besides it isn't really going to help you beat Tom. Unless you can distract him, 'Look Tom, Mars is really bright tonight!' Maybe while he is looking up at the sky, you can curse him. Mmmn! That stew is tasty. Mrs. Weasley is a great cook! Ginny is probably a great cook too. The oven door swings open and unleashes the smell of freshly baked rolls through the kitchen. You use your napkin to hide the fact you are practically drooling.

The fireplace roars and Arthur Weasley steps out. He greets his daughter and wife before greeting you and Hermione. He's a bit barmy, but a great guy. You are grateful that Hermione is here. He generally asks her all the questions about muggle objects. You remember the first night you got here, she was actually trying to explain Ohm's law to him at the kitchen table with some drawings and everything. She will make a great teacher one day. People, and you use that term loosely, like Malfoy think she is an insufferable know-it-all. You appreciate her. She tries so hard to help people. She'd probably tutor ferret boy if he asked her. All those people in Ravenclaw are so jealous. Ron is lucky to have her. Too bad you can't have her and Ginny. Now there's a fantasy! You don't think your girlfriend would approve. She already has had to share so much in her life. It wouldn't be fair to ask her to share you. Besides Ronnie would pout. You can hear him now, 'Why does Harry always get everything?'

Your train of thought is interrupted by Ginny's hand on your thigh. All thoughts of curvy Hermione vanish as you turn back to your freckle-faced princess. Mentally, you try and command her hand to move higher. Sadly, it doesn't work. You know she is flirting with you, don't you? Pants are becoming uncomfortably tight again.

“Oh, I dropped my butter knife. Harry would you mind getting me one?” Her face is so innocent, but her eyes betray her teasing.

“Uh. How about you just use mine?” You will make her pay for that later.

“Oh okay, but could you grab me a glass of pumpkin juice from the chill box? Please?”

“Sure.” You say with an audible gulp. You push your chair out and stand to the side, hoping to avoid disclosure of your uncomfortable ‘problem’ and grab her glass and hurry to the chill box. She is an evil one, but you have a good idea where she is ticklish. You shall have your revenge. Fortunately, growing up with the Dursleys has given you exceptional stealth and concealment skills. Brings a whole new meaning to the phrase, ‘Is that a sausage in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?’ Most times at the Dursleys it actually was a sausage – here at the burrow no sausage.

The rest of dinner passes with no further attempts by the strawberry tongued vixen to embarrass you, other than the maddening presence of hand on upper thigh. That would be embarrassing if there was no dinner table. After dinner, you assist newly discovered girlfriend with clearing table and washing dishes. You are victorious in the small water fight that ensues. Ginny asks if you want to go out for a walk before it gets dark. You would rather go flying, but suspect this activity will be restricted for several days to come. On the positive side, walking does permit much more physical contact than broom riding. Needless to say, you accept.

You are a bit self-conscious now aren’t you? As you are heading out the door to the Weasley backyard, you have to keep wiping your sweaty hands on your pants. ‘Sure Cassanova, girls love the sweaty clammy feeling. You are so very smooth.’ The two of you have a very pleasant walk around the pond. It is a little too small to call a lake, but still it seems a bit large to call a pond. You reckon that Hermione would know the proper classification. Quit thinking about Hermione! You focus on Ginny and talk about fun things like the twins and their latest pranks, Charlie’s latest letter from Romania and of course quidditch. Ginny is one of those girls that talks with her hands when

she is having fun. Its very attractive isn't it? The two of you sit on a bench by the little dock that extends into the pond/lake thing and sit to watch the sun set. At least that is the intention. Ginny might have seen the sun go down, but you have your eyes closed as you are kissing her neck. The setting sun also does wonders to conceal hand placements that might have been a bit more objectionable in full daylight.

You feel like you must have kissed her out here before. Hopefully the missing days will return and you will remember all of your songfests. You move your hand down to her knee and begin to tickle the back of her knee. She should be laughing hysterically! She's not. You distinctly remember snogging her and tickling the back of her knee, while she squealed like every time she goes into the bookstore. Wait one damn minute! Hermione squeals when she goes into the bookstore. Hermione giggles whenever her cat's tale brushes against the back of her leg. You stop trying to tickle Ginny and keep kissing her. Closing your eyes you concentrate and try to remember. Ginny's hair is soft and fine as you run your fingers through it. Hermione's feels much more coarse. As your mouth and hands work on autopilot a furious torrent of thoughts race through your mind. At some point in time you snogged Hermione Granger right here! This makes absolutely no sense whatsoever.

"Mmmm. That's nice Harry, but we had better stop before Dad starts looking for his muggle shotbomb."

You respond with a series of quick kisses. Your body is protesting, but your mind is actually glad as you break away. You need time to process this. Something is definitely not right here.

"I think you mean a shotgun, Ginny." You casually laugh to try to avoid looking suspicious.

"Oh okay. I'll have to remember that for Muggle Studies this year." She says smiling brightly at you. You paste your stupid grin on your face. Years of greasy potion's master have taught you how to mask behind an emotionless mask. That won't work here. You are happy and happiness implies smiling. So suck it up and smile at your girlfriend there Potter. It's a good thing that Ron isn't here. You need

some time to sort this out. It would be nice if you could ask Hermione, but how do you go up to someone and say. 'Pardon me oh best friend of mine, I seem to recall playing a bit of tongue rugby with you. Could you please be so kind as to refresh my memory as to when this event occurred?' That would go over well especially with the news that she and your favorite keeper are actually performing said deed. Things aren't adding up. You hate this feeling. It is the same gut feeling you have everytime before something goes wrong. You can't place where this anxiety comes from. It was there when you were trying to figure out who was trying to steal the stone, or when everyone thought you were the Slytherin heir, and when everyone thought you had put your name in the TriWizard cup. You've never had that feeling here at the Burrow. This has always been a safe haven, but yet here is that awful feeling in the pit of your stomach. Maybe your 'gut instinct' is like that idiot divination teacher's 'inner eye'.

You get back in the house and make a bit of small talk with everyone. You need to keep up the appearance don't you. After twenty minutes, you excuse yourself using the patented, 'My scar is aching' excuse that works so well. Ginny gives you another breathtaking kiss and reminds you to take your pain potion before you go to sleep. You grab the greenish potion from the counter and wish everyone a good night.

Once back in your room, you set the potion down on the desk. You look at your faithful owl and whisper. "Something is dreadfully wrong here girl. You know it too, don't you?"

Your owl hoots in acknowledgement. She is a smart one. If she were a person, she'd probably be Hermione. Why does everything keep coming back to Hermione? You sit on the edge of the bed and think for a couple of minutes. Ginny wanted you to take this potion. Maybe you shouldn't? It is green like a pain potion. It smells like a pain potion. On a whim you pour some into an empty cup. It's not green anymore. It is yellow and it smells different. Over the years, it has been your misfortune to experience a wide variety of pain relief and sleep inducing potions. None of them are yellow. You dump the rest of the potion into the cup. It is yellow and smells like strawberries. As you sniff it, Ginny comes to mind. You sniff the empty potion flask. It still smells like a pain potion. Across the hall in the bathroom you

rinse and refill up the flask from the water tap. Looking inside the flask, it now looks green and smells like a pain potion. The ruddy flask is charmed! You walk back in to the bedroom grab the cup and dump it down the sink. If you had time, you could use one of your textbooks to help you identify the potion. For now you go back into your room and open your trunk. On top of everything is your summer homework. That's funny, you don't remember doing your summer homework. It's your handwriting though. Oh look there's that journal that Hermione gave you for Christmas that you have never used. You see a bookmark sticking out of it. You snatch it and your potions textbook out of the trunk. Most pain potions have a mild sedative in them, you are going to have to pretend to fall asleep. Someone will probably check on you. You climb into bed and open the textbook. You set the journal on the side facing away from the door and open it to the page mark. The words you see in your own handwriting shock you. You reread it three times before sliding it under the covers and pretending to be asleep. Ten minutes later the door opens and you hear Ginny's voice.

"Aw. He looks so cute." The door closes. You slide the journal out and reread it for the fourth time.

July 1, 1996

Well since Hermione gave this to me, I figured I should actually use this. Why now you ask? Well because she is kind of my girlfriend. Hard to believe after all this time isn't it? We were just talking and suddenly she kissed me! I mean she's given me a little peck on the cheek every now and then, but this was right on the lips! I'm worried about Ron. He pretty much stormed out of the room. Apparently, I am Viktor Krum now. Maybe he should have opened his mouth and said something rather than just stuffed it with more food! Well too bad for him. Mione is mine! I am going to take her on a picnic tomorrow by the pond. Her kisses are so much better than Cho Chang kisses.

July 2nd, 1996

The picnic was a great idea. Ron is still being a complete arse, but at least his quidditch camp starts tomorrow. Ginny doesn't seem too happy either. I would tease Mione about it, but she might withhold

those strawberry flavored kisses. She was really impressed that I stayed up last night and got pretty far on my summer assignments. For a surprise I am going to owl Flourish and Botts and get her a tab connected to my vault. I am kind of disappointed that I won't be allowed to Sirius's will reading tomorrow. Hermione promised to keep me company. I told her the prophecy today. I didn't want to, but it felt right. I can't expect her to be my girlfriend unless she knows. She took it better than I expected. I'm guessing we will be spending a lot of time in the library this year. As long as she's there, it won't be bad.

July , 1996

Okay, I don't know what the hell is going on here! Ginny is apparently my girlfriend and today is July 1st. At least that is what everyone is telling me. Something is wrong. I woke up this morning and Ginny told me that I hurt myself out in the garden. Everyone seems nervous, like they are walking on eggshells around me. We are going to see Fred and George's shop today. I am going to get them alone and see if they can help me understand what is happening. What happened with Sirius's will? I don't dare ask anyone. Hermione (guess I should stop calling her Mione) said that she and Ron have started dating. Have I been obliviated? I told Hermione the prophecy!

You jot a few notes in the journal expressing your disbelief and noting what happened today especially the part about the yellow potion in the charmed flask. You hear Ginny and Hermione out in the hallway saying they are going downstairs. Moving carefully, you slip your invisibility cloak out of your trunk and slip it on. You grab a pair of 'Sneakers' that you paid Dung to charm when he was on babysitting duty so they wouldn't make any noise. You slip downstairs and noting that the creaky floorboards don't creek. Dung did a good job for a change! Mrs. Weasley must have gone upstairs already and Mr. Weasley must be out in the shed playing with his muggle devices.

You notice the girls are going outside. You follow trying to listen to their conversation.

"So, how is having Harry as a boyfriend?"

“No real complaints here. I’m just happy to finally have a chance with him. Trust me, I am going to make the most of it. I just hope when they take him off the potions that he will still feel the same. He seems a little inexperienced though. You could have taught him a few things.”

“Hey that’s not my fault! His only previous practice was that hag Chang. I only had a couple of days with him before your dear brother had his little revelation about how he feels about me.”

“Like you didn’t know already.”

“No, I could never be sure. Seeing Harry snog me opened his eyes though. It was about damn time too!”

You listen to them joking about you. You are furious. Whatever is going on, they are both in on it! You hoped that maybe Hermione had been obliviated too, but no here she is joking around with Ginny about your love life.

“Hermione, do you think I am doing a good job so far? I hope the headmaster won’t be mad that we switched me for you.”

“Ginny, you heard Ron blurt out part of the prophecy. I will tell you it’s not the whole thing. Harry told me the rest at our picnic. The headmaster is convinced that he needs to be able to love to win. You and I were the only logical choices. Plus the potions wouldn’t have worked if there he didn’t already feel something for you. Do you actually think Harry would start a relationship with someone so soon after Sirius’s death? No, he would be moping around here trying to avoid everyone and everything! I am not saying I agree one hundred percent, but if snogging one of us is going to stop Tom Riddle, then pucker up Ginny!”

So that’s it! Dumbledore told all your friends part of the prophecy. You apparently told Hermione the rest. She at least isn’t telling everyone else. Dumbledore held that little tidbit from you all this time and suddenly, he is telling everyone. You felt bad about all the broken items in his office. Now you hope that a piece is on his chair and gets shoved up his ruddy arsehole!

"I guess you're right. It's just I had always hoped he would notice me and just when I had given up and started owling Dean, this whole thing comes out of nowhere. So suddenly, I am backtracking when it comes to Dean."

"I see your point. How did Dean take your breakup?"

"Not too bad. He told me if things don't work with Harry, he wouldn't mind trying some other time. All in all he is a really nice guy. So you are really going to be Head Girl this year?"

"Yes I am so excited! They've never selected a sixth year before! I am sure it will end up in Hogwart's a History! He also said that I would be able to use a time turner for my NEWT year. Plus this year I am getting extra charms work and next year transfiguration."

"I guess Professor Dumbledore was worried you wouldn't go along with this?"

"Honestly, given the gravity of the problem I would have, but I am not going to turn all these things down. I just hope Ron isn't going to act like a buffoon, when he opens his letter and is quidditch captain. He's already going to stay a prefect and probably be head boy, if he can keep his grades up. Plus the headmaster isn't going to be too pleased with his jealous little tantrum. If he starts bragging again, I may have to put him in his place."

"I am sure you can give him the proper motivation."

"Shut it, you!"

"I think I am really good for Harry. Don't you?"

"Of course you are Ginny. When he is with you he seems to have more fun and looks like he is enjoying himself. Around me he tried to be a bookworm, because he thought that is what I wanted him to be."

You really want to jump out there and yell at them, but other than a momentary relief it would just get you obliterated again. So, you hold



your tongue and hope for some other useful information. The bushy haired traitor is talking again. You should be listening. Apparently, you are supposed to be a 'Happy Well Adjusted Harry'.

"I'm a little upset with Fred and George. They are trying to start a betting pool on how many more times Harry will get obliviated this summer. Honestly, do they have no shame?"

"Shhh. Keep your voice down. At least you can tell which one is Fred after Harry gave him a black eye before they stupefied him. George said that they're still patching up the damage to the shop Harry's accidental magic caused, the estimate they got today is over 150 galleons! Poor Mum still has to put repairing charms on the family room furniture each morning from the first time, otherwise the furniture falls apart. On the other hand, my boyfriend sure is powerful." You feel a bit better knowing that at least one Weasley got something they deserved. Listen to Ginny, she reminds you of Pavarti strutting you around the Yule ball dance floor. Putting the show dog through his paces eh Gin?

"I know. I have never seen accidental magic that powerful. He needs to learn to control his emotions better. It's probably what is preventing him from learning Occulmency. Oh and what is this about Harry buying you a broom? Don't think I didn't catch that." Oh of course, it can't be Snape's worthless teaching methods that are to blame! When was the last time she was mind raped? If Ginny ever gets that broom, you can show her where to stick it.

"It's perfectly acceptable behavior for a boyfriend to give his girlfriend a gift. I didn't see you complaining to vigorously when he offered to buy you one of every book in Flourish and Botts." You wonder if they carry a book on screwing over your best friend. Perhaps Hermione can write one if they don't.

"I wasn't going to let him do that! Seriously Ginny, don't take advantage of Harry. Go slow with him. He is going to make the most horrendous mistakes, but don't rush things." You sneer at the vote of confidence you just received.

"It's not like that is going to happen anyway, Mum made sure that a sexual inhibitor is in the potion anyway. It would stop him before things got out of hand." That's comforting. You can look at the menu, but you just can't eat. You always did like that song by Howard Jones.

You walk away resisting the urge to scream at the two girls who up to a moment ago meant everything to you. You don't know what to think now. Who can you trust? Where can you go? The only thing you know for certain is you have to get out of here!

Disclaimer – You are Harry Potter. You don't even own the rights to yourself. Some woman with the initials JKR does. You'll have to add her to the list of people you need to "thank", because it is her fault as well.

### Chapter 3 – Palm Tree Apartments

How do you find yourself in these situations? Seriously! Maybe the curse really did kill you when you were a baby and this is somebody's twisted version of hell? So apparently, everyone has decided you are going to be happy and well adjusted this summer, even if you would rather be grieving for the loss of Sirius. Who gives a rat's ass about what Harry wants? They also decided what girl you are going to be involved with apparently after a setback or two. You slip back into the Weasley house. It's not your home anymore. It's theirs. It never was your home to begin with. It's not even the Burrow anymore. It's just another one of your prisons. You are not sure if they are your friends anymore. More and more everyone seems like your keepers. They need you to win their war for them. Maybe you really are a 'freak', some kind of side show attraction. Come one come all and see the amazing Boy Who Lived! He talks to snakes! He fights Dark Lords! Only two sickles! A little bit pissed off now, aren't you? Better throttle back on the anger there, before you cut lose with some accidental magic and get another July 1st Lockhart special. You wonder how badly you lost it the last time you realized what was going on.

So much for Dumbledore's promise not to meddle and to be straightforward with you. So much for Hermione's friendship, probably the one constant in your sad excuse for a life. You could expect something stupid like this from Ron, but Hermione! There is a saying that everything has a price. The price of her friendship was apparently Head Girl a year early, some extra lessons and a magical device to let her study even more hours out of the day. You bet Dumbledore paid for Ron's little quidditch jaunt. At least being Harry frickin Potter's best friend is finally paying dividends for him! Ginny is pretty easy to understand. Her motives are probably the most clear of all. It is so very nice that she put her thing with Dean on hold to play "Harry's snog buddy" for the summer and beyond. At least they said that they would eventually take you off these potions. Maybe you might actually like her. You should be thankful shouldn't you? If you

weren't so preoccupied with trying to figure a way out of the mess, you would figure out a way to properly "thank" everyone involved. Good thing Riddle doesn't know how easy it would be to bribe all these people.

'Alright Potter', your inner voice suddenly has a Snape like tone to it. That is disturbing on so many levels. 'Quit feeling sorry for yourself and figure out what you are going to do about it.' You bet you know who mixed up these love potions. He probably had a smile on his face while he did it. Even if he didn't, you add him to your list of people to "thank" on general principle. That list is growing rather quickly isn't it?

You take a quick inventory of what you have to work with. You have your wand, your cloak, your glasses and the clothes you are wearing. Upstairs in your trunk, there's a small bag of money, but not nearly enough. Mrs. Weasley might have your vault key around here somewhere, but you wouldn't even know where to look. You've got your broom. You could fly away! No! If they are smart enough to do all this, they are smart enough to put tracking charms on your broom. They'd expect you to go for the broom. The hat wanted to put you into Slytherin. Maybe it's time to start thinking like one! They would expect you to either fly out of here or floo straight to Sirius's, well actually your house. You should floo first to Diagon Alley and then to Number Twelve. You won't be able to stay there long, but you should be able to gather some supplies and get out of there. Maybe Remus will be there. You would like to think there is someone out there you can trust. There is no way he would go along with this. Then again, you never pictured Hermione going along with this!

The girls just came back in. 'Ginny looks so pretty in this light. Damn! C'mon Potter, you can fight off the Imperius curse. Snape's little concoction can't top that. Can it?' You squash the urge to gather her in your arms and snog the living daylights out of her. It helps to stare at the clock or something else. What the hell! Go ahead and look at Hermione's heaving funbags. Why the heck not? They are treating you like an object. Turnabout is fair play. Well actually when you think about it, fair play in this case would involve would involve your cloak, Colin Creevy's camera, Hermione naked in the shower, a pair of soapy funbags, a spell that creates about a hundred duplicates of a

picture, and your owl making deliveries to every male in the fifth, sixth and seventh year boy. Maybe you could caption it. 'The Head Girl is giving you detention for some good clean fun!'

"So there never was any question in your mind when it came to Harry and my brother?"

"Actually Ginny, I like them both. They both have a certain appeal, but I do know that Ron would never be capable of handling Harry and I as a couple. The other day proved that. So it's better this way. Harry needs to be controlled for his own good. He needs to enjoy himself. I'd end up turning him into a bookworm. You seem to make him more outgoing and lively. It pains me to admit it, but you're better for him." Ginny heartily agrees. 'Good thing Gin, if you didn't you might actually have to get a guy who wants to be with you without a potion!' You add silently.

Okay maybe you wouldn't send the pictures to the Slytherins. That doesn't mean you forgive her. You just don't need to give Malfoy and his trolls any wank material. That's all. Mentally, you are encouraging the two of them to go on up to bed so you can make your escape.

"I'm going to go on up. Are you going to stay up and read?"

"No, Madame Pomfrey said I still need to rest and our little walk has worn me out. I'll study better in the morning than if I tried to do it now. Scientific studies prove that staying up late and trying to cram can actually have detrimental effects on your ability to retain what you read." From the expression on Ginny's face you aren't the only one thinking, 'Oh give it a rest already!'

Finally, the two girls who apparently stole your heart and are trying to see what they can get for it on the open market, head up the stairs. You fluffed the pillows and made it look like you are under a blanket. It might look a bit funny if they stop to think that it is July - whatever date it actually is! But it should be enough to fool someone who takes a peak in the door. Grabbing a kitchen knife, you hack off a lock of hair. Maybe they will be nice enough to throw the Dark Tosser off your track. You vandalize the Weasley clock, removing your hand and writing 'Manipulative Bastards' right next to 'Mortal Peril'. You

scribble a note on a piece of parchment and sneak out to the broom shed. You take Ginny's old broom, which once belonged to either Bill or Charlie and hide it in the back corner under some rags. That will make them think that you took her broom instead of your broom. You look at your note and read it with approval.

To my so called friends,

As you can see I have figured it out again. Small wonder we aren't exactly winning this war isn't it? My guess is you have tracking charms on my broom, so I am taking Ginny's. Since I am a man of my word, feel free to get her a new broom with my money. Merlin only knows how much of it you are spending anyway! It's the last gift she'll ever get from me. Take care of my owl. Apparently, she is the only real friend I have. I am going away. Maybe I will be back maybe I won't. I left some hair on the kitchen counter, so you can continue your little games if I don't come back to Hogwarts. I hope you do end up in your favorite book Hermione, with a caption saying how you screwed me over to get ahead! Tell Ronikins, when he gets back that he is even better at betrayal than he is at chess.

You know I don't know who is worse. Tom just wants to kill me. You want to deprive me of any choices and force me to live the life you want me to. I could write more, but why bother. Let's see how good your tracking skills are in the muggle world.

Harry J. Potter

Ps. Fred and George – If you are running a pool on how many more times I will have to get obliviated this summer put me down for a galleon on “You won't get your damn hands on me again!” I'm good for it, you backstabbing gits! Oh and another thing, if I do come back get used to hearing this, “Hi, I am Harry Potter. For all my joke and prank supplies, I shop exclusively at Zonko's.”

Satisfied with the note, you sneak back into the house and floo to the Leaky Cauldron. You then immediately floo to Number Twelve from there, keeping your cloak on the whole time. It is after 11 pm. No one seems to be here.

'Okay Potter, lets figure out some things. I'll go grab Sirius's old trunk. He is bound to have some galleons and clothes I can use. Then grab a broom and some food and disappear. You slip up the stares. There is a light on in the library and the door is open. Someone is hunched over a pensieve. Hot damn! Remus is here. The worst that can happen is he's in on it and tomorrow you wake up to Ginny kissing you.

You keep the cloak on. Dumbledore uses the pictures as his spies. Tap Lupin on the shoulder and take him to someplace without any pictures. The bathroom sounds good. You sneak up behind him and tug on his robe sleeves. The head pops out of the bowl. It has a red ponytail attached to it.

'Shit! It's Bill!'

"Who's there?" Bill says. He reaches out and catches your shoulder. Double shit! You're busted.

"It's Harry. Keep it down and don't pull my cloak off. It will wake the paintings." You whisper.

"What are you doing here?" He replies in a whisper.

"Follow me to the bathroom. There aren't any paintings there."

Bill fishes the memory out of the pensieve bowl and puts it into a vial. He heads over to the bathroom. You review your options. You could try and knock him out and make a run for it. He's always been a pretty good guy though. How about a test?

"Okay, Harry. What's this all about?"

"Bill what day is it?"

"The tenth. Well in a few minutes the eleventh. Why? Are you okay? Is everyone at the Burrow okay?"

"Everyone is fine. I don't even know where to start telling you what is wrong."

“You could show me in the pensieve.”

“How do you do that?”

“Concentrate on the memory you want me to see and I can withdraw it with my wand.”

You concentrate on the minutes starting from when you take the “pain potion” upstairs. You focus on the journal entries and then following them out into the yard and overhearing their conversation.

“Okay Bill, I have the memory.” He touches your temple with his wand. It is an irritating feeling, like trying to get water out of your ear or getting rid of a tough patch of earwax as he pulls the memory out. The events seem a little blurry now and slightly out of focus. He has your memory dangling like a white string from the end of his wand.

“How long is it?”

“Maybe ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. Put your cloak back on and wait here, while I see what this is all about.”

‘So, Bill’s not in on this. Ginny and Ron always described him as something of a rebel in the family.’ You step out into the hallway with the cloak on. Bill will think you are still in the bathroom. You can get the drop on him if you need to. The question is will he help you. Your heart is beating like crazy. It is the longest ten or fifteen minutes of your life. Finally he steps back out. He doesn’t have his wand in his hand. That’s a good sign. You tap him on the shoulder so he knows where you are and both of you go into the bathroom again.

“What in the hell was that?” Bill whispers urgently.

“Dumbledore’s summer project. Force me to fall in love with Hermione or Ginny and keep me under control. Make me a happy well-adjusted Harry Potter – the perfect weapon against Voldemort. Pay off your brother, your family and Hermione to go along with it. I



don't even care what they promised Fred and George. So what do you want to do about this Bill?"

"Let's get that memory back in your head and then I will apparate with you to my apartment. Fleur should already be gone. We can talk there without having to whisper. Sound fair enough. I'm not going to do anything until I get the whole story."

Bill fetches the memory from the Pensieve bowl and shows you how to cram it back into your skull. This sensation is like when you accidentally snort water or juice up your nose. Why can't magical sensations be more pleasant? Why do potions have to taste bad? Why are the only pleasant spells you have ever experienced are the cheering charm and the Imperius curse? At least Imperius felt nice. He brought back a couple of books with him too. Though you don't know the details of Sirius's will, they are probably your books now. You ask him to grab a few books for you as well. You are becoming a bookworm by necessity, not because you are into Hermione. It's more about the bastard trying to kill you.

With that you get another unpleasant experience, side along apparition again. You appear in a modest flat. The decorations are rather Spartan. Bill sets the books down on the coffee table and gestures for you to sit.

"Bill, I thought I heard you out here. Did you come back for some more of my irresistible charm? My portkey was delayed until tomorrow. We have an extra night." Fleur asks in her heavy French accent, walking into the room in what can only be described as a see-through piece of lingerie. She might as well be naked. You are embarrassed, but you know you can die a happy man now. Forget Ginny groping your bum. This is the next patronus memory you are using!

"Merde! What is Harry doing here?" Fleur scurries back in the bedroom. You don't know much in the way of French, but you have a good idea that she is not very happy right now. You don't care. The only cognitive thoughts in your mind right now are 'Nice ass! Hell, nice everything!'

Bill clears his throat. Both of you are extremely embarrassed. “Harry, give me a minute. I have to go get yelled at. Grab something to drink and relax. Welcome to the Palm Tree Apartments.”

It takes about five minutes but Bill and Fleur emerge. Sadly Fleur has chosen to wear a dressing robe, which while very flattering doesn't come close to matching the image branded on your mind right now. Your cheeks are on fire. Everyone is blushing. You spare a moment to wonder how far down her blush goes. Sometimes it's great to be a teenager.

“Harry, Bill says his family is giving you love potions or something? What is this all about?”

They sit and you do your best to explain. You tell them the first two lines of the prophecy and tell them of your link to Voldemort. You explain about Dumbledore's theory of love and how he apparently lined up Hermione as your girlfriend. Fleur laughs when you mention how Ron lost control and must have told world plus dog what was going on. She doesn't seem to have a high opinion of him. Yours is fading pretty fast as well. You go on to describe waking up this morning with Ginny as your girlfriend and the rest of the day as you can recall.

“Harry, what color was the potion they were giving you? What did it smell like?”

“It was a pale yellow color and it smelled like strawberries.”

“Oh. I know that one. It is called ‘My Friendly Infatuation’. The girl, she gives you the potion and then kisses you with the potion's activating balm applied to her lips. Hermione was right. It will only work if you already have some feelings for the girl. Most girls use it to move a relationship on. To give the boy a, how do you say, a bit of encouragement in the right direction. Many of the girls I went to school with felt they had to resort to such things, especially with me around.”

Bill chimes in. “So what do you want to do Harry?” There's the million-galleon question. Sometimes it sucks to be a teenager.

"I don't know. I don't want to go back there. You know what the sad thing is, I couldn't think of anyplace to go, because I have never been anywhere. If it's not Privet Drive, Number Twelve, your family's house, Diagon Alley, or Hogwarts, then I haven't been there. Could I stay here for a while?" See you won't call it The Burrow anymore!

"Fleur and I are both leaving the country tomorrow. Mr. Diggle is coming the day after tomorrow to use the flat, while his house is being repaired. She is going back to see her family in France and I am going on a mission for the Order. That's what I was doing at Headquarters last night, doing some last minute reviewing and grabbing a couple of books from the library."

"Harry, you could come with me. My sister would love to see you again." You cringe at the thought of another girl who wants to get her claws into you and she probably only just turned ten yet. "I guess from your reaction, the answer is non."

"Sorry Fleur. I just escaped one girl, well two actually. France could be fun though. Bill, where are you going?"

"South America to try and locate a magical artifact. I have a team coming in from other countries. I am the only Order member. I am leaving out of here and traveling on a muggle airplane out of Heathrow."

"Do you need an extra hand?" You ask interested. "I won't be able to use magic, but I'll do whatever you want me to."

"Harry, where I am going, no one checks to see who can and can't do magic. It's pretty rough territory and dangerous. You should go with Fleur."

"Would I be able to do magic in France without being detected?"

"Non. Our ministry is every bit as strict as the British. At least our food is better." Fleur says with a dazzling smile.

“Bill, please. I can hold my own. I need to practice. I can help. Dumbledore isn’t going to let me do anything here. I have a mad wizard with a bunch of followers here in England, who would like nothing better than to stick my head on a flagpole. If I went to France, it sounds like I would have fun. It would be great to relax and try and enjoy myself, but with all this hanging over me I can’t afford to relax. I need to be working.”

“Fred and George said you are able to cast a corporeal patronus. Is this true?”

“Yes. It was able to drive several dozen Dementors away at once.” You answer wondering where he is going with this.

“Liethfolds are pretty common out in that part of the world. So much that if you are out in the jungle you should have a guard who can drive them away at night. I could use an extra person to stand guard. It will let the rest of us get more sleep for tomb exploration.”

You sense an opportunity, “I’m a halfway decent cook too.”

“Alright. Mum will kill me and Dumbledore will probably find my ghost and interrogate it, but I’ll bring you with me. I don’t even want to think about what Ginny will do! I have a second curse breaker, two hitwizards and a guide. The curse breaker is Mexican. The guide and one of the hitwizards are Americans and the last hitwizard is from Korea. We probably won’t have to disguise you, but we need a cover story for you. You’ll be my cousin or something, lets think of a name.”

After a couple of minutes and a few outlandish ideas from Fleur, you settle on the name James Black. Bill said he would get some muggle identification from Gringotts for James Black. You worry how Bill is going to pay for it.

“Bill, this isn’t going to cost you too much is it? I don’t know if I can access my money, but I’ll pay my way.”

Bill looks at you. He looks rather sad for a moment. “Well, as if you need any further reason to be pissed right now ...”

“Wait let me guess? Dumbledore is paying for this with my money isn’t he?” You bet Ron’s quidditch camp came courtesy of that as well. The funny thing is, had the little shit asked you, you would have gladly paid for it. He would have gotten all pissy about it and refused. Now, he is earning his payoff by screwing you over and it is still your money in the end. The irony is amazing.

“Yeah. I didn’t think twice when he transferred a whole pile of galleons from the Black trust into the expedition vault. It’s already in Brazil, waiting for us.”

“Now I have to go, seeing as I am paying for this shindig!” You say moving Dumbledore up to the very top of the list of people to “thank” ahead of the girls. You wonder if he has ever heard of a muggle candy called EX-LAX. Now that you think about it, it is just par for the course. You come to a realization. You are his asset. Your money is his asset. It is better than just being his weapon you wonder?

“Harry, why don’t you take the spare bedroom for the night. I’ll go to the bank tomorrow and get the papers. I am supposed to swing by the Burrow in the morning to say goodbye to everyone. I’ll offer to help ‘look’ for you, but I’ll have to leave if I want to make my flight.”

“They won’t be able to figure it out?” You ask worried about a last minute betrayal.

“Who do you think the twins learned how to lie from?” He says with a devious smile.

“Charlie?”

“Not a chance. Charlie tried to hide his Dragon Handler job from Mum. It didn’t last twenty minutes. If we ever get near a pensieve again, I’ll show you that memory. Mum actually cussed!” Even as pissed as you are right now, that would actually be funny to watch.

Fleur offers to do a hair color charm on your hair. It will only last for two days, but now you get to see what Harry Potter looks like with blond hair. It’s kind of weird, but you wonder if you haven’t crossed a point in your life where weird is the norm. Bill shows you to your room

and grabs some extra books of the shelf. They are his old school texts. He says that you can use them to study. They may not be what Hogwarts is using this year, but they are better than nothing. He says that he will resize some of his old clothes for you to wear until you can go shopping in Brazil. When you thank him for risking so much for him, he stops for a second.

“Harry, my dad and my sister directly owe their lives to you. Ron does too, probably. Without you, they would be dead. I don’t know their reasons for forgetting this and frankly, I don’t want to know. They may think they are doing right by you, but obviously they are not. Hopefully with some time away, you’ll find a way to forgive them and they’ll realize their foolishness. Now get some rest. We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Hey Harry, I just thought of something?”

“What’s that?”

“I have to book an extra ticket for James Black. I believe Mr. Black and his companion Mr. Weasley would prefer to travel in first class instead of coach. I felt guilty earlier and booked coach.”

“Who knows how else Dumbledore is spending my money? I might as well get something out of it. I believe you are correct. Mr. Black and Mr. Weasley only travel first class!” You both get a good laugh out of it.

“Night Harry.”

“Night Bill.”

Bill leaves and you page through a defense text laden with notes in the margins. Bill was Head Boy. He must have had very high grades. Charlie was the quidditch player. You remember Hermione bugging Percy a few years ago, when he was Head Boy for his note taking techniques. Typical Granger, anyone else would just ask to borrow his old notes. From the looks of things, she should have been asking Bill instead. You suppose that Bill would have made a great DADA instructor, instead you got Umbitch. Uh-oh, sounds like Fleur and Bill are getting a little frisky. Should you say something? Should you slip on your cloak and go watch? Bad Harry! Hopefully one of them will

remember a silencing charm soon. You try to concentrate on Bill's writing. That's interesting a forty-five degree twist on a banishing charm will impart extra force. You should remember that one. Hey, Fleur is a bit of a screamer! That's also profoundly interesting. Suddenly everything goes quiet. One of them must have remembered the silencing charm. You try and read for a few more minutes, but nothing more is really sinking in. Putting the book down, you try those worthless Occulmency exercises again. After ten minutes of trying to clear your mind, you give up and try to get some sleep.

You wake up in a small puddle of drool. You are so cool aren't you? Maybe if the freckle-faced punkass err princess saw you now, she'd have second thoughts about how good a 'catch' you are. You slide your clothes back on and take a trip to the loo. Bill left some clothes on the floor outside your door for you. You still hear Fleur moving about. She seems like she is in a rush.

"Good morning, Harry. I need to be at the International Portkey Terminal in ten minutes. Bill will be back soon. There is some breakfast on the counter. I do wish you would have come to France, but I understand. I am sure Gabrielle would too." She gives you a quick peck on the cheek, fortunately you turn the cheek that wasn't marinating in your drool to her. After that and a hug, she disappears. The thought occurs to you that if they don't track magic in South America, then Bill and anyone else can teach you how to apparate. Take that Miss Funbags! With that cheery thought, you make your way to the shower to clean up and get into some fresh clothes.

After showering you get dressed. You have to reuse your boxers. There are some lines that can't be crossed and wearing another blokes' underwear is one of them! The 'turn them inside out method' is called for in this instance. Just thinking about that drags up the memory of Ron explaining the technique to a very disgusted Hermione in your third year. You're pretty mad again aren't you? Putting a hole in Bill's wall with your fist would feel good right now? Stupid, but good. You decide not to. It wouldn't serve any purpose. Bill could probably fix up your hand and the wall, but that's not the point.

After killing a couple of hours reading the sixth year defense text and listening to the wireless set, Bill finally returns.

“Wow! When you kick over an ant hill, you really kick over an anthill, Harry!” He says laughing.

“How’d it go?”

“Oh, they are running around like chickens with their heads cut off right now. They barely noticed I was there. Apparently, you are distraught and not handling things very well right now. I helped them look for you for a while. I even went to the bank to see if you tried to go there. I managed to pickup a copy of Sirius’s will for you to read later. Mum was trying to track down Dumbledore, but Minerva doesn’t know where he is. Dad’s at the Leaky Cauldron. He and the twins are running all over the Alley. I finally said goodbye and that I would keep an eye out at the airport, if you made it that far. So are you ready to go to the airport, Mr. Black? I need to ask you to keep a look out for the notorious Harry Potter. He could be anywhere!”

“I’ll do that. The Prophet used to go on about how dangerous and mentally unstable Harry Potter is. Should we curse him if we see him?” You quip while adding the entire staff of the Daily Prophet on your list of people that need extra special thanking.

Bill fixes your clothes so they actually fit. He hands you the fake identification papers and you watch as your picture complete with the blond hair appears instantly next to the name James Andrew Black. Magic is rather impressive, isn’t it? It doesn’t take Bill long to finish getting ready. Packing is accomplished by magic and before you know it you are standing in the terminal looking at large airplanes. You ride the fastest broom on the market. You perform death defying aerial stunts, which only occasionally result in hospital stays. There is no reason to be intimidated by an airplane flight. The flight crew’s safety record is certainly better than yours! Oh for crying out loud! You are supposed to be the hero of the wizarding world and now you are acting like Neville before a Snape lesson. This is ridiculous. You wish Bill would come back. He is off picking up some snacks and reading material for the long trip. It might unsettle the passengers if you started reading a book on magic curses and whatnot. You



shudder to think of the chaos that could be caused by a single copy of The Monstrous Book of Monsters in a confined space of an airplane.

As you stand there watching the jets land and take off, you listen in on a conversation between a man and his daughter, who have sat in the row of chairs next to your carry on baggage.

“Are you sure you checked the woman’s teeth? The rotfangs are everywhere!”

“I did Daddy. She had perfectly normal teeth. I think the rotfangs generally control the International Portkey Terminal. That’s why we don’t go there anymore. Well that and the restraining order. We don’t have anything to worry about here.” The girl’s tone is reassuring and slightly annoyed. It sounds like she is the parent and her father is the child.

“I know. I know. It’s just with all these delays I am nervous that we won’t arrive in time.”

“The snorkacks will be there Daddy. We should even get a chance to look for those glitterwings, you were discussing in your last issue.”

“Skitterwings! Not glitterwings! They perform a complex mating ritual involving muggle bug zappers, but only between Midnight and One Thirty AM.”

“Skitterwings, got it. Now why don’t you relax and maybe write some notes for your next issue. I’ll keep an ear out for our flight. They said everything is on time right now. Here’s a cup of water. The healer reminded me to have you take your medicine.”

You listen to the man reply with theories about mind controlling substances and heliopaths. The girl uses a carefully chosen argument and finally the man relents and ingests his medicine. It can only be one person, Luna Lovegood. What bothers you is that she is acting around her father rather like everyone else acts around her. She sounds perfectly lucid and in control of the situation, rather than distant and dreamy. You see her reflection in the window glass.

Damn! Luna is walking over towards the window where you are standing. You keep your attention focused in front of you. Hopefully, she won't notice you. Just don't say anything, you'll be fine. Please don't let her notice you. Shit! She is looking at your reflection in the mirror now. Don't see the scar. Don't see the scar. Don't see the scar! Her eyes widen in shock.

"Oh, hello Harry. Blond really isn't your color, but it is nice to see you trying something new." She saw the damn scar. If you were a certain super hero, your spider sense would be tingling. On the other hand, would an Acromantula super hero have a human sense that tingled? Worry about that later - back to the problem at hand!

"Err, I'm sorry you must be confusing me with someone else." Your tone wouldn't even fool Hagrid into believing you. Good thing the Hat didn't put you in Slytherin! You keep staring straight ahead, not wanting to meet the eyes of your accuser.

"How have you been, Harry?" Luna Lovegood says to you.

"Miss, my name is James Black. I am afraid I am not the person you think I am." That was a much better answer. You sound sure of yourself this time.

"Harry, none of us are the people others think they are. Well except maybe Snape. He is pretty much what everyone thinks he is." You laugh. You can't help yourself. You're busted.

"Hello Luna. What are you doing here today?" You say with a hint of resignation in your voice.

"Our latest expedition was delayed and Daddy and I are finally leaving today. We prefer to go the muggle way. The portkey terminal tracks you. They are pawns of several conspiracies, so many it's difficult to keep track. Here they give you little bags of peanuts. This is much better." She deadpans with her newly replaced dreamy stare.

"I overheard you and your father. You can drop the act." You say. Her eyes fly open in shock. After a moment, she cocks an eyebrow at you. Her dreamy expression clears instantly. It's rather disconcerting.

"You're running away aren't you? I heard a rumor you were at the Weasleys. I called Ginny the other day to come over and she said I couldn't."

"I can't answer that question, Luna. We shouldn't even be having this conversation."

"You're not alone are you? You do have someone with you?" The concern in her voice is evident.

"Yes. I won't say who." You answer trying to be vague. Amazing, you are trying to be vague and Luna is trying to be straightforward! How deep is this rabbit hole?

"Do you need any help?"

"No, not now. I do need you to forget that you saw me today?"

"Good. I am glad you have someone with you. You have a way of finding trouble, or it has a way of finding you. I won't ask where you are going? I get the impression you wouldn't tell me anyway. Don't worry, Harry. I won't mention seeing you here. Besides, who would believe old 'Looney' anyway?"

You're curious now. She isn't acting anything like the Luna you know. Suddenly, she is a different person, very different. "You realize that you just called yourself 'Looney'. What gives?"

"I answered your question earlier. None of us is the person others think they are. Everyone wears a mask. Some are just better than others. You're trying to hide behind one right now. I won't mention seeing you here and you won't mention seeing me act normal."

You have an epiphany. The only time you remember her being this serious was in the middle of the Department of Mysteries. She fought extremely well outlasting everyone but Neville. She had been nimble

and her spell casting had been much better than the DA meetings. This is the real Luna Lovegood! Not the girl reading the Quibbler upside down. Not the girl saying outlandish things or brutal, unspoken truths at inappropriate times.

"It's all an act. Isn't it?" You say as understanding dawns on you.

Her smile reminds you of the cheshire cat. Wow! Two Alice in Wonderland references in about just over a minute! "Congratulations! You discovered my secret. You are the first! Hello. My name is Luna Melanie Lovegood." She says offering her hand.

"Right now I am James Andrew Black." You shake her hand in amazement. Could the past twenty-four hours be any weirder? You're not so sure you really want to know.

"I suppose you are wondering why?" She says after a minute of awkward silence. Right now, you are more interested in this than finding out what the "Power the Dark Lord knows not" is.

"You could say that?"

"The ultimate prank." She answers.

"What?" Not exactly the answer you were expecting. Then again, what answer were you expecting?

"Looney Lovegood is the ultimate prank. I do whatever I want and no one says anything. I say whatever is on my mind and no one says anything. Everyone just accepts my behavior. Think about it. I could show up to the welcoming feast naked and get away with it, but that would be giving away what I plan to do my seventh year." You make a mental note that if you are still alive for the start of Luna's seventh year to try and be present for that.

You consider this startling revelation. It truly is a mind numbing experience. "I have two questions. The first is, why? The second is, why admit it to me now?"

"I'll answer the second question, you have too many problems in your life. You could use a good laugh every now and then. The very fact that you are standing here in a disguise tells me that something is dreadfully wrong. I've made it over the halfway point without anyone catching on. Two people sharing an inside joke is more amusing than just one. Plus, even when I was acting completely mental, you treated me with kindness. I actually felt guilty when you offered to help me find all my things at the end of the term. I almost told you right then. As for the first question, it's a long story. I don't think we have the time. We could exchange owls?"

You shake your head. "Not likely. I'll be indisposed. It's probably a longer story."

"Let me get something out of my bag. I'll be right back." She runs over to the seats where her bags are. You watch to see if she says anything to her father. She doesn't. She comes back with a pair of books in her hand. She hands one to you. "They're charmed. What gets written in one appears in the other one. Daddy and I like to write notes back and forth when I am at school. He just got me a new set."

"Is your dad 'pranking' as well?" You ask. Her expression darkens.

"No. He hasn't been the same since..." She trails off.

"Oh crap! I'm sorry. I didn't..." Way to kill the conversation, idiot!

She smiles a weak smile. "I know."

Trying to change the subject, you look at the book. "How does this work?"

"I write on the first page. You write back on the second page."

"Does it work over long distances?"

"Daddy was chasing one of his creatures in Mongolia and I was able to get them at school. It takes longer for the words to appear, but they eventually get there. It was about a six hour delay, when I timed it."

“This is brilliant.” It really is.

“These are the expensive models. Most students buy the cheap ones so they can talk to their girlfriend or boyfriend if they are in different houses. Zonkos sells those. These come from a shop called Mallory’s Outfitters.” You watch as she pulls a muggle pen from her purse and jots ‘Hello’ on the first page. It instantly appears on your books first page. You ask if she has a spare pen. She rummages around in her small purse for a moment and then hands you one. You try yours out with the same results.

The PA sounds announcing boarding for Luna’s flight. She looks up at you and smiles. You both seem uncertain. Is this a shake hands moment or a hug moment? You end up sharing an awkward hug.

“Be safe Harry. Write soon. I am curious to see how you ended up here today.”

“I will. You be safe too Luna. I’m equally curious for your explanation.”

You release her and watch her go pick up her bags. She looks back at you and already the dreamy expression has returned to her face. Her father asks her something and she answers looking not very interested. They queue up at the gate and you watch as the line moves forward with the ticketing agent checking boarding passes. Her father seems fixated on the boarding agents smile. You don’t even notice Bill returning. Just before she steps out of sight she turns back and smiles at you. She disappears a moment later.

“Who was that?” Bill asks worried.

You smile at him and answer. “Someone I thought I knew.” He looks confused. You can’t blame him. You’re pretty confused. She’s been a friend for almost a year, but other than the moment in front of the veil; this was your first real conversation with her.

“Did she recognize you?”

“I’ll explain on the plane. Don’t worry. I just discovered that Fred and George aren’t necessarily the greatest pranksters of recent history.”

Author’s notes – Full discussion on Darklordpotter. So what do you think of Luna? My acknowledgements to the fantastic team of FairyQilan, Smeagolita, IP82, Sirius009, Yarrgh, jmcqk6, and Chuckdatruck. Your input helps make this story something unusual amongst the mundane.

Disclaimer – You're Harry Potter. Well actually, right now you're pretending to be James Black. It's a long story, but you already know that don't you? There's a woman out there with the initials JKR, who claims she owns you and all rights to you. Unfortunately, she has lawyers and courts that agree with her. She should say something to all those other people who are trying to 'own' you. Plus if she does 'own' you, then you'll need to ask her why you keep ending up in all these messes. Finally, if she owns you, maybe she owns Voldemort too? You wonder if you could convince her to sell the wanker dirt-cheap?

#### Chapter 4 – Scoff at the Monkeys

"So that was the infamous Luna Lovegood." Bill says from his seat next to you. Takeoff wasn't too bad, a little unnerving though.

"Yup." You feel a little uneasy. Bill forced you to explain everything as you boarded your plane. You were a bit reluctant. It was a tense moment, but then he reminded you how much he was risking by agreeing to help you. Sometimes it isn't all about you, Harry. You relented and hoped that she would forgive you this breach of her trust.

"And she's not barking mad like everyone thinks?"

"Apparently, she is 'crazy like a fox'." You say smiling back at him.

"Wow. I gotta admit, it's one hell of a prank! Beats the pants off anything I ever heard of while I was at school! I don't even think Ginny suspects anything and she's supposed to be one of Ginny's best friends."

Your mood darkens, "I thought I was supposed to be one of Ginny's friends too."

"Shit. I'm sorry for bringing her up. Try not to think about it. The flight to Rio is eleven hours long. Just relax. Soon we'll be far away from here. I don't want you to get upset during our flight."

"Why."



"I saw what your little outburst did to Fred and George's. It was rather impressive. We're on a plane full of people that will be several miles in the sky. So needless to say, stay calm and don't lose control of your temper. I'm in no mood to die."

You sober up pretty quick on that note. Too bad you were obliterated, it would be an interesting memory. "Good point. What exactly did I do at Fred and George's?"

"Well one of them is sporting a nice shiner. The other one had one of their imitation sorting hats floating around him calling him a 'bloody git' over and over. He asked me if I could disenchant it. I told him I didn't have the time. George tried destroying it, but whatever you did seems to have made it fairly indestructible. Don't rightly know how you managed that, but it was nice, very nice. There were scorch marks all over the walls and the front counter was kind of melted. The absolute best part was they had to take the mannequin out of the front window. She kept exposing herself to people passing by. You also seemed to have destroyed a good chunk of their inventory. It will cut into their profits big time."

"Yeah, of course I gave Tweedledum and Tweedledumbass their start up money. Apparently, that was money wasted." You mutter.

"That was you! Of course, your prize money from the tournament! Mum read me the riot act, when she thought Fleur and I did it." Well you'll just have to make sure she finds out exactly where they got their money. Maybe if ickle Gin Gin decides to start an exotic dancer service, you'll fund that to just to piss off 'Ma' Weasley. Maybe you could buy Flourish and Botts and ban Funbags from the store, or Ron and either the Quidditch store or Honeydukes.

"I should have just donated it to St. Mungo's. Oh well easy come, easy go. I am sure if they beg Dumbledore, he'll fix it up with my money anyway." You're not bitter are you?

"Good thing you aren't bitter about this." Bill adds echoing your thoughts. Bill's pretty perceptive.

“So what can you tell me about where we are going?” You ask looking for a new topic.

“Not too much until we land. We, my friend are going to Rio De Janeiro. One of the most beautiful cities, you shall ever see. Sadly, it’s their winter there, which means we have to bundle up, as the temperature gets as low as 13 or 18 degrees Celsius at night and usually in the 20’s during the day. It’s rough weather compared to winter in Scotland, but you’ll manage.” Bill says chuckling. You can’t help but smile. “We’ll be there for a couple of days before while we meet up with the rest of the expedition. So, you’ll have some time to shop for some decent clothes and ogle some of the locals.”

“I’ve never been to a beach before.” You add absently looking out the window at the clouds pass by.

“Har- um James when we’re not working, make a list of things you’ve never done before that you want to do. If it’s within my power, we’ll do it. Does that sound okay?”

You smile again. Bill’s a good man. Maybe there is hope for Ron, then again maybe not. “I can honestly say that’s the best offer I have ever had.”

The beverage cart comes by. You get a ginger ale. Bill selects a German beer. You both enjoy the light snack. Flying first class is very nice. You relax for a little while and read a copy of the Sun, Bill brought with him. Gotta love those Page 3 girls! You’ve got an hour to kill before they show the first in flight movie, ‘Toy Story’. You remember Dudley went to see it in the theaters last year, most likely to annoy the kids who were actually trying to watch the movie. Mentally, Vernon, Petunia and their spawn skyrocket up the list to rest just behind the lemon drop sucking swindler. The other one is a movie called ‘Leaving Las Vegas’. Never really heard of it, but hey you’ll watch it anyway. It’s not like you ever really got to the movies and after Dudders got his telly and VCR in his room he stopped watching rented movies where you might possibly catch a glimpse of them. Hell, the fat pig probably would just watch his porn in his room. You’ve caught him a couple of times. It was good blackmail material. The threat kept him from bothering you for two whole weeks last

summer. Should have just ran and let the Dementors kiss his sorry behind. Must have been your 'saving people thing' again. You'll have to be a little more selective in the future about who you go around saving. Have you put Umbridge on the list yet? Damn that list is getting pretty long. You should write it down. You wonder if Luna would like to read the list. Maybe she can help you out with it?

You decide to see if she has written you yet. You fish the enchanted journal out of your bag in the overhead bin. Sure enough there is a letter waiting for you on her page.

Dear Harry,

Well, that certainly was a surprise for both of us! It's a little cramped in coach, I keep trying to convince Daddy to fly first class, but he insists that we would be monitored if we did. Apparently, armpit odor of many people crowded together must prevent this type of monitoring. Ignore my horrible handwriting.

So, what can you tell me about the latest predicament you have gotten yourself into? Seems like you have gotten off to an early start this year. Normally, you wait for the school year to start. Ha! Ha! I'm just trying to lighten the mood.

I guess while I wait for your explanation, I should give mine. I didn't handle my Mum's death all that well. Daddy was even worse. Things were bad. Some of our relatives brought in some specialists. The people at the Quibbler were really concerned. That said, some rumors started going around that the both of us were completely nutters. You wouldn't know anything about stories and rumors tainting someone's reputation? Would you?

Right about that time was when I went to Hogwarts for my first year. Some of my fellow Claws apparently heard some of the stories. Our first night, we sit around our common room and introduce ourselves. When it was my turn, well one of the older kids took it upon themselves to inform everyone that I was crazy and his mum treated me and my Dad at 's. They say you never get another chance to make a first impression – mine didn't go so hot. I made a few

attempts at making friends, but you and I are both aware of how cruel magical children can be to each other.

To make a long story short, I started playing along. It was tremendously funny! Plus by that time the Heir of Slytherin was out and about. I don't know how it was in your classes, but all of us ickle firsties were scared witless. My dormmates watched me like a hawk for a week straight when someone smarted off and said 'Hey, it could be the crazy girl!' Well, in the end it was my old childhood playmate Ginny. After I found out, I befriended her again. She had been so withdrawn through most of the year that I hadn't really approached her. The one or two times I did, she must have been under the influence of that book. She was both rude and dismissive. By the time we became friends again, my 'Looney' persona was well established. We hadn't really seen each other too much since Mum's accident. I guess she had heard the stories too and wrote it off to me losing Mum. She was happy to have any friends at the moment and Looney can make everyone laugh. I probably could have stopped, but I decided to keep on. My Mum used to tell me stories about all the pranks that went on while she was in school. Apparently your father and godfather made an impression on Mum. She helped with some of their activities. To honor her, I decided to keep the prank going for as long as I could. I think she even dated Mr. Black for a brief time before meeting my Daddy. I didn't really get a chance to know him, but I know he was important to you. I'm sorry we couldn't save him.

Anyway, enough of this depressing rubbish! You wouldn't believe how much self-control it takes not to start laughing, when I am on a roll. I can't believe some of the things I have gotten away with saying over the years. Here's one that should put a smile on your face. One day in Potions, I asked the ghoul if poor hair care was an effective defense against nargles, both the standard and the yellow striped variety. It took a minute for the ghoul to get it and it cost twenty points plus a night of scrubbing cauldrons, but it was damn funny! See I bet you are laughing now aren't you?

That's enough for now. We are on final approach. Daddy's eager to get out after his creatures. Did you know that Snorkack tracks look a great deal like deer tracks? Good thing I like the outdoors and the

smell of fresh air. Sweden is great this time of year. I hope wherever you are headed is nice.

So that's the origin of Looney Lovegood? I'm probably going to let the Headmaster in on it at the end of my sixth year and see if he will make me Head Girl in my last year.

Okay, so what is the deal with James Black? It's your turn. Spill it!

Yours,

Luna

You put the notebook down and find yourself smiling especially at the Snape jab. It's impressive. It takes a lot of willpower to follow through with such a plan for several years. Wherever Dad and Sirius are, you suspect they approve of her multi-year prank. You get the feeling that there is more to it than she is leading on, but if she wants to open up, it will be on her timetable. You have enough experience with people demanding that you talk about your feelings. Plus it isn't like you are exactly an open book now is it? Bill asks about the journal and you tell him. He explains he has one as well to report back to the Order on the progress of the expedition.

"The first couple of times I make an entry, I'm going to ask if they have found you yet? Should be good for a laugh or two."

Setting the journal aside, you relax for the next twenty minutes before the first movie starts. Toy Story is funny. In a sad way you can relate to Buzz Lightyear, when the poor guy discovers he really is just a toy and not actually a Space Ranger. It strikes a familiar chord in your soul. So there you are the hero of the bloody wizarding world getting a big old lump in your throat over an animated movie! Hell, the little cowboy toy's jealousy is even familiar. All he needs now is the red hair to go with it!

You calm down and enjoy the rest of the movie. It really is a good movie and the chair reclines pretty far. You're glad you aren't back there in coach as you think of Luna's armpit comment. You get served again after the movie and sip on your second ginger ale. The

only fizzy drinks available at Hogwarts are generally the nastier tasting potions. Maybe muggles can't regrow your bones, but they figured out how to add cherry and grape flavoring to medicines.

Well you should probably write Luna back. How much can you tell her?

Dear Luna,

Thanks for writing so quickly. My response will probably take longer. I'll try to tell you as much as I can, but I have to leave some details out. I'm headed across the Atlantic to the Americas. The weather is supposed to be really nice there and I may even be able to get a decent tan. My traveling companion is doing some work in the area and has agreed to take me along. The nice part is that wherever I am going, no one really checks to see if you're old enough to do magic, so I can get some practice in. I may even be able to convince him to teach me how to apparate! You would think given my ability to attract trouble someone should have already showed me. Nah of course not! There's only a Dark Lord after me. Why would I need a means of escape? My guess is they didn't teach me because they were afraid I would escape them.

So, I wake up yesterday morning with a throbbing head and my girlfriend, Ginny telling me that I took a spill on my broom. That's right Ginny was my girlfriend yesterday. Hermione was a few days before that, but stay with me I'll get there! Ginny and I have a good old time until we go down to the bench by the dock. Hey just to satisfy my own curiosity, would you call that a pond or a lake? So anyway, we get down there and she wants to do what girlfriends and boyfriends do. I'll spare you the details, but then I start to remember doing the same thing with Hermione there! By the way everyone was telling me that yesterday was July 1st. You guessed it, I am now not only the Boy-Who-Lived, but now I am the Boy-Who-Lost-Ten-Days.

I get back inside and go up to my room. I find out the pain potion isn't a pain potion. It's an 'I wuv you' potion in a charmed flask. I only wish I was making this up. I fake like I drank it and act like I fell asleep. Later I sneak out and listen to Ginny and Hermione discussing the master plan. Dumbledore is convinced that I am his little weapon to

kill Voldemort. He believes that I need to be in love to do so, thus instant girlfriend. He bribes everyone to go along with it. Ron got to go to Quidditch camp and Hermione is going to be the first 6th year to ever be Head Girl. Apparently, Ron couldn't stand me and Hermione snogging and blew the whole plan. I don't remember all this because I was obliviated – several times in fact. From what I could learn, Ginny decided this was her chance to have me and jumped in to be a replacement. Needless to say, I got the hell away from my friends and met up with my traveling companion. I showed him the whole sordid mess in a pensieve and he opted to take me with him to get me out from under everyone's thumb.

I just want to thank you for coming with me to the Department of Mysteries. Thinking back on it, you were an incredible fighter there. You've obviously been holding back during the DA. I'm sad about Sirius. He was a good man. Everything I said in the Quibbler was true. He was innocent of the crimes they accused him of. That's one of the other reasons I am so pissed right now, one of the days I was obliviated was the day his will was read. I wasn't allowed to go, but it is almost like they stole my grief from me. I don't know, maybe I am just being stupid.

That's all for now. Write again soon. Thank you for trusting me with your secret. I had to let my traveling companion know, because he saw the two of us talking, but he is trustworthy and honorable. He will keep both our secrets. I hope you do not feel that I have betrayed you in any way. It was not my intention. Had my situation not been as desperate as it is, I would have flatly refused to tell him. I don't have many friends left, so please don't be too angry with me.

Harry

You hope she isn't mad that you had to tell Bill what was going on. You also feel bad that you can't tell her who Bill is right now - eventually maybe, but not right now. You close the journal and grab some reading material. It's tempting to take a nap, but Bill had a point about your wild magic. It wouldn't do for the Dark Wanker to trigger a nightmare several miles in the sky with only some flimsy metal protecting everyone. You've decided to stay awake.

You and Bill chat. He tells you stories from his time in Egypt. Sadly half the stories he has to stop in the middle, when he realizes that he can't exactly tell a story about how an irate sphinx was chasing him through an ancient Egyptian temple seeping in old magic in the middle of a bunch of muggles. He whispers a bit of the details in your ear.

"Well to make a long story short. Trust me when I say you'll enjoy the long story when I can tell it. Even though I answered her riddle, she didn't appreciate the way I was staring at her, ahem shall we say large endowments." You try to think back to the one you encountered during the Tournament. She had very pretty eyes. That's all you really remember. You never looked beyond them. Probably the adrenaline and terror, not to mention it probably was a good thing that you didn't if some of them are self-conscious.

"Big ones huh?" You query hoping for some more elaborate details. You're crude, but no more than any other male teenager you suppose.

"Massive, but in my defense I was twenty-one, in a strange country and it's not my fault that particular sphinx happens to dislike the confinements of clothing." He adds wistfully.

You look forward to hearing more about Bill's wild adventures. The life of a cursebreaker seems pretty cool. Too bad you took divination instead of ancient runes. For a moment you wonder if there ever was a time when the subject was just runes. You think to yourself how weird it would be, last year your course was just runes. This year they decided it's now going to be ancient runes. Shouldn't they have a course in modern runes? You decide to ask Bill.

"Is there a course for modern runes?"

"Not at Hogwarts. Warding is essentially modern runes. Temporary ones can be drawn in the air. If you want to do the permanent stuff, you need to paint, carve or otherwise inscribe the runes onto a surface."

"Sounds straightforward." You say.



“Anything but.” He replies. “Much of the time when you come on a group of runic wards, the biggest problem is determining the order in which they activate. In the trade we call it the progression. Negating one in the wrong order can cause a cascading activation. You don’t want to be around one of those! If you are the one that triggered it, odds are you won’t live to see another one.”

“How do you tell?”

“Subtle shades in the aura they give off, complex detection magic, use of deductive reasoning and more often than I would like to admit, a half-baked guess backed by your gut feeling.” Up until this you figured that all the Weasley males were crazy about something. Pa Weasley has his muggle objects. Charlie’s got his Dragons. Percival has his need for order. The backstabbing twins have their obsession with pranks and jokes. Turncoat Ronnie is a quidditch fanatic. You have just come to the conclusion that Bill is just as crazed. He seems to get his thrills from trying to fulfill a death wish in some forgotten tomb. Well from last night’s antics, you suppose he also gets his thrills from Fleur, or at least that’s what you’ve heard!

“Here I thought Charlie was the one with a death wish?” You add wondering if your little hand on Ma Weasley’s clock would have just shifted to ‘finding a creative way to get himself killed’. Good thing you ripped it off the faceplate before you left the place formerly known as your friend’s family house. No more calling it the ‘B’ word.

“Oh hell no. Dragons are fairly predictable and straightforward. It’s whatever is lurking in the next room or the disillusioned trap waiting in the next hallway that gets the blood pumping.” You notice the slight gleam in his eye. You get it when you are right behind the snitch.

The next couple of hours go by. The flight attendant is very nice. She gets you another ginger ale and you get three bags of peanuts. Mr. Cursebreaker only gets two. The second movie is downright depressing. As much as you identified with Buzz, you hope you never hit the absolute rock bottom that this tosser hit! Elisabeth Shue is still pretty hot! She looked better in that Cocktail movie. Aunt Petunia used to watch that one a lot, the old weed had a thing for Tom Cruise.

They offer you a meal. It's not bad, not great either. Looks a bit tastier than the crap they are taking back to coach. The chicken's a little tough. The prison cook at the Weasley Family Detention and Reeducation Center could do much better. So could the House Elves at the Dumbledore Institute for Advanced Student Manipulation. That said, the chicken even as tough and dry as it is tastes like freedom.

For the rest of the flight, you try to relax and read what you have available. Bill is jotting notes down on a pad of paper. You anxiously check the journal to see if Luna has replied. You are a little worried that she will just tell you to sod off.

The plane finally lands in Brazil. Eleven hours is a long time to be cooped up in one place. On the other hand it was better than double potions, normal potions or just plain five minutes with Severus. Seriously, what does the man have on the Chief Manipulator? Pictures of what he does with all those socks? Romantic trysts with Minerva? She'd probably be offering monotone instructions for improving his technique. Ewwww! Why do you persist in giving yourself images like that?

'Harry, I trust Professor Snape implicitly.' You think in a mock Dumbledore tone.

'Oh yeah, considering how trustworthy your staff selections have been over the past five years! One of them was an actual Death Eater and the other had the Bloody Dark Wanker hiding in his head Mr. Twinkling-Eyes-I-know-what's-going-on-in-my-school. You can track down a kid in an invisibility cloak, yet somehow miss the bloody sixty foot snake moving around the castle!' Your inner Harry answers. You leave the Fool, the Werewolf and the Sadistic Toad Bitch out of your make believe fight.

You wonder what an interview with The Old Coot Who Continues to Live is like. 'Have you killed anyone this month? You have, oh dear not good. What's done is done though. Best not to dwell on that. You're not planning on killing anyone else anytime soon are you? You are, oh dear also not good. Here, try a lemon drop. Could I convince you to hold off killing anyone until you get a chance to kill Harry Potter? I can. Excellent! Allow me to offer you the Defense

Against the Dark Arts position. Do you have any spare socks you'd be willing to part with?'

Those thoughts and others entertain you as you go through customs and baggage claim to get your fake luggage. Bill has everything important shrunk down to size in his carry on with notice-me-not charms on everything. Bill explained that people flying internationally without luggage attract attention almost as bad as wizards and witches trying to dress for blending in with muggles. A short while later and James Andrew Black is officially in Brazilian Hotel overlooking a gorgeous beach. You stand on the balcony and listen to the sounds of the Atlantic Ocean and the street below. The air smells wonderful! It is calming and soothing and does a better job clearing your mind than Occulmency ever did. It's earlier than it should be, but your body will adjust to the jetlag. Bill says that he will take you shopping for both magical and muggle things tomorrow. You shake off your borrowed clothes and climb onto your bed. You close your eyes and think about the three extremely attractive Canadian girls you saw in the lobby as you drift off to sleep.

Author's notes – Full discussion up on Darklordpotter. One cliché that always bugs me is when Harry watches the Star Wars trilogy and ends up comparing everyone in the Trio to the characters. Seriously, Ron as Han Solo – you've got to be kidding me! Here I had Harry watch some popular movies from 1995 that should have been available to airlines in 1996. Next chapter, you get to go shopping and spend some money. Way to stick it to the man! Oh wait, it's your money anyway. Are you sticking it to yourself? If so, join the crowd. You also get to meet the rest of the team. I need to warn you faithful readers that I have a professional exam to study for in June and July. This will cut down on my writing time.

Disclaimer – You are still Harry Potter. Even trying to change your identity won't affect that. There's a woman out there with the initials JKR. She owns you and any other identity you try to hide behind. At least she doesn't seem to be after you right now. Maybe she knows about Dumbledore's fixation on socks?

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## Chapter 5 – Live in Their Dark Tents

Now that's what you call a good night's sleep! No ugly nightmares about Tommy. Maybe he was too cheap to pay for the transoceanic option for the curse connection. The bed is nice and comfy, you could spend most of the morning in here, but Bill says it's time to do some shopping and at the very least you need more underwear. One really is the loneliest number. Perhaps it is time to go 'commando'?

You shower knowing you still have an hour and a half before breakfast ends. Maybe the three blonde girls from Toronto will be there. That's the real 'golden trio' – mercy! Apparently, the rumor about Potter men and redheads isn't necessarily true. You are getting excited about today, outfitting Harry Potter – err James Black. You opt to reuse boxers one final time. After all, you are going to be trying on lots of clothes today. Merlin knows who tried them on before you! You dress and use your complimentary toiletries the hotel provided. Money talks and bullshit, well, bullshit fathers a child and names him Draco. Ha, that's a good one! You have to remember to tell that one to Luna. Thinking about your fourth blonde girl (fifth if you count Draco!) in less than fifteen minutes you decide to check the journal. Your eyes pop out of your head.

YOU UNBELIEVEABLE GIT! COULDN'T KEEP A SECRET FOR TEN FREAKING MINUTES! Just kidding. I understand. You have a lot going on and plus I think I recognized a certain eldest brother, so I guess we are even. Tell anyone else and all bets are off.

I don't know what to say about your letter. I am stunned that they would do that to you. Not Ginny, mind you, she's always been after you. In fact, I would venture to say that I have married the two of you well over a hundred times. When Ginny used to come over, I had a stuffed bear, if you must know his name is Barry Potter. We painted a little lightning bolt on his forehead and we'd go out and make little flower wreaths. Once we did that, I would officiate over the ceremony and the two of you would live happily ever after, at least until the next weekend, when we would do the whole thing over again.

Are you even going to come back to Hogwarts this year? I hope you do, but wouldn't blame you if you didn't. If you do, we can make Hermione's life as Head Girl more miserable than she could ever imagine. I'm up for some good old fashion pranking, plus Looney can get away with so much! Just you wait and see. I am shocked at her though. I could see this from Ronald, but it really surprises me about her. Even if you don't come back this year, I promise you I will make them suffer as only my insane alter ego can!

Yes, I have been holding back during the DA. I can probably give you a run for your money in a duel. I wouldn't mind finding out one day if you're up for it. Unless you're scared of wittle old me? I dropped the act in the Ministry, because it wasn't playtime any more. I think about our performance there a lot. Ginny wasn't too bad under pressure. I honestly didn't think much of Ron, Hermione and Neville's skills. I am sorry if that offends you but look at how it went. Ron was a sloth. Maybe Quidditch camp will teach him some reactions. After Hermione cast each spell, it was almost like she looked around for someone to give her house points. Sure she knows tons of spells, but there is a difference between knowing and using! Neville is a sweetheart, but he lacks confidence and consistency. Surviving that fight should do wonders for him, I hope it does. You, on the other hand, were really good! I'm not just saying that to make you blush either. I think you were the only one who really got how desperate the situation was. I am going to see about trying to find some better offensive spells than the ones I had at my disposal that night. I will make the next Death Eater I encounter wish they were never born.

Sorry, didn't mean to get so bloodthirsty there and I hope you are not upset by my brutal assessment of everyone's skills. It's amazing we

were even that good given our excellent defense training, sheesh! You were the best instructor I have had in four years there. By the way, since you seem to know Professor Lupin pretty well, does he have a thing for hinkypunks and grindylows? I'm not trying to slight the man; he did cover a lot of Dark Creatures, but didn't teach my class much in the way of spells. Then again, it was just a second year class.

Anyway, Sweden is nice. Daddy is meeting up with our usual guide, if they'll let him out unsupervised this year. Mostly, our expeditions consist of wandering around looking for tracks, taking large quantities of pictures of said tracks and discussing their migration patterns. At least I have convinced them that we have collected enough fecal samples! Mostly, I just like to hang out in the fresh air and be away from all the people. It's beautiful and quiet out here. How about you? Are you getting some peace and quiet? You could use some. I'm not entirely sure you would know what to do with it! Just kidding! Let me know what you are up to, or at least as much as you can.

Yours,

Luna

You feel like a little weight has been lifted from you. At least you know that she isn't mad at you. You are slightly concerned that she suddenly seems a little too desperate to talk, but all things considered, you can't really complain. She made some valid points about everybody who fought at the Ministry. What Luna had said was indeed brutal, but it had a certain truth to it. Hermione does tend to wait to see the effects of her spell before beginning the next one. Ron's footwork is good, but his wand work is marginal. Hopefully, Neville will be better after he gets his own wand. Luna and Ginny were hindered by a limited spell inventory courtesy of piss poor instruction.

Dear Luna,

First, thanks for not being upset. He seems to be the only one in that family worth a damn right now. Well actually, I don't know the other brother that well, so it's wrong to judge him by the rest. Second,

please tell me you don't still have the bear! There is such a thing as too much information. Though, I must admit I am curious to know if you ever married Barry. Sorry, I had to ask.

Well today, we are going shopping. My rapid departure left me with little in the way of possessions. It turns out this is all being paid for with my inheritance money, so I don't feel that bad about buying some nice stuff. If I see something, I'll pick you up a souvenir. Maybe one of those 'my friend went to wherever I am at and all I got is this lousy T-shirt' shirts? At the moment, I don't know if I am going to go back to Hogwarts. Then again, what choice do I have? I am still underage. I think Remus Lupin is my guardian now and he's pretty much a puppet of the headmaster. I am going to try and learn as much as I can here. I plan on being able to apparate soon. Since you know who my traveling companion is, you probably know what he does for a living. Well that's what we are going to be doing. I get to be camp cook and night watchman. In between, I should be able to convince some of the rest of our group to give me some ad-hoc training.

If I do come back, I look forward to making my former friends lives as difficult as possible, with your participation of course! Excuse me for asking, but I always thought you had a thing for Ron. Was that just part of your act? Now that I have introduced to the real you, I just can't see the two of you.

I'm not offended by your thoughts on the fight at the Department of Mysteries. When I have relived it, I have mainly looked at my role and not everyone else's. Once I read what you wrote, I thought about it and came to pretty much the same conclusions you reached. I am trying not to let my current opinion of some of them get to me, but you are right. You and Ginny didn't have anything beyond stunners, body binds and disarmers to work with. Neville is brave, but raw. Ron is very physically capable, but lacks something when it comes to his wand work. Hermione is very knowledgeable, but she doesn't have that competitive streak needed in a duel. If I do come back, I'll be more than happy to duel with you. Though I must admit, I am more than a bit scared of wittle old you.

I have never asked Remus about his thing for grindylows and hinkypunks. My guess is he taught from experience and he probably had a lot of experience with those things given his background. You should have touched on them in your first year, but you had that waste of human flesh known as Lockhart, don't get me started. I wish I knew where Remus stood on all this. I'd like to think that he would be as ticked off as I am about it, but at the same time he is probably part of the whole 'greater good' thing.

I am glad you are enjoying Sweden. Too bad you can't convince your father to check along the beaches. I was about to make a cheeky comment about me not knowing what to do with peace and quiet, when I realized that you are right. I don't know what to do with them, but I am willing to find out.

Yours,

Harry

You set the pen down and close the journal, sending the message on its way. Oops! You forgot to tell her the Draco comment. Oh well, some other time then. With your stomach growling a bit, you head over to Bill's room and meet up with him for breakfast.

"Morning Blondie!" Bill says, "Guess I'll need to redo the hair coloring charm on you before we go shopping. Wouldn't want it to suddenly wear off. You don't mind keeping it until we head out of town do you? Here hold still it will only take a moment."

"No, not really. I doubt anyone would recognize me, but I don't want to chance it."

"You sleep okay?"

"Yeah, no dreams. I wonder if there is a distance limitation to my connection to the Dork Lord."

"Hopefully, but that is way out of my specialty. Hell, it's way out of anyone's specialty. I wouldn't even begin to guess. Ready for some



breakfast?" You nod in agreement, but it does feel strange as your body's clock adjusts to the time change.

The two of you head for the elevator. "So what are we doing today?"

"After breakfast, we can go get you some regular clothes and then we'll hit the magical village about 5 kilometers from here and do the other shopping. I've got a small conference room booked. Tonight the guide and the other curse breaker should be in. Our hit wizards don't arrive until tomorrow."

"Yay! Spend my money before Dumbledore does!"

"Harry, let it go." Bill says with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Why should I?" You ask.

"Fine, I didn't want to get into this with you, but I guess it needs to be said. Do you think Dumbledore is rich?"

"Well, yeah." That's a silly question.

"He's not. The only people who make less than he does at the school are Filch and Hagrid. He gets a little money from licensing his image to the chocolate frog cards, but all his other titles are honorary ones that pay nothing. He had a bunch of money before he started fighting Dark Wizards. You know what he does with the money he does have?"

You gulp. Dumbledore must be rich. He has to be. "What?"

"Did you like being in school with my brother, or Neville Longbottom? Forget about what just happened between you and my family."

"Yes." You answer wondering where this is going.

"Most of Dumbledore's money is in tied up in scholarship trusts. Every year he has three scholarship winners from his trust accounts. The other one from your year was Mandy Brockle – something or other. My family ran out of school money after Percy. They wouldn't

have been able to send the rest if it wasn't for the headmaster. They would have had to go to one of the other smaller schools, where the quality is suspect. You think the Board of Governors isn't an elitist group trying to keep the poor families and muggleborns out? Hell, Lucius Malfoy was one of their members. You probably don't even know that your family trust sponsors one Muggleborn every year through the school."

"It does? I do?" You say taking it all in and wondering whose education your family is footing the bill for.

"Yup. Those two Creevey boys are Potter Trust Scholarship recipients. In your year, I think it's a Hufflepuff girl named Megan Jones." Suddenly, the hero worship of the two brothers makes a bit of sense. You always wondered how the two muggle boys developed their obsession with you. Megan Jones has maybe said less than a dozen words to you the entire time you've been at school. She is probably embarrassed being around you.

Bill looks over at you as the elevator doors close. "Sorry Harry, I was trying to think of a nicer way to tell you about all this. I figured yesterday, you wouldn't have wanted to hear this at all and we'd have just ended up arguing which wouldn't have been productive at all."

"But Neville's family shouldn't be that bad off? They're an old pureblood family." You say.

"So is my family. Do you know how much money it costs to keep his parents at St. Mungo's? For fifteen years?"

"No, I don't. How do you know all this?" You admit somewhat ashamed of yourself, that you had never considered these things.

"Dumbledore uses me as a go between with the goblins handling the books. I don't know why he is doing the things he is with you, but he has been helping out a great number of people over the years. Especially those who have helped him like my family. Answer this, would you use the money you have to fight Voldemort?"

You are surprised Bill can say it without going into the usual hysterics. "Yes."

"That's what he is doing with it." It makes sense – damn!

"Hey, you said the name?" You ask trying to get away from the subject, since you know you're on the losing end.

"My job requires that I encounter a lot of terrifying things. He is a terrifying thing and I don't really feel like encountering him, but I can say a name without feeling that I am going to be struck down. I just don't go around saying it, because it makes other people uncomfortable."

Your conversation is cut short by a family of five entering at the fifth floor. It's a lot to think on. You want to be angry. You want to shout. You also don't want to sound like a petulant child who didn't get a lolly. The elevator arrives in the main lobby. You follow Bill towards the mouth-watering breakfast buffet.

"Bill, let me ask you something? What would you do if you were me?"

"Did you read the copy of the will yet?"

"No. I was exhausted when we got in. I was going to do it tonight and have you with me if possible to explain things to me and keep me from getting too angry."

"Well in short, Sirius left Remus in charge of your financial affairs until your seventeenth birthday. So, as long as he is signing off on whatever the headmaster is doing, there isn't really much you can do. Your options are pretty limited. You could threaten to go to the press or take Remus to court on charges of inheritance mismanagement. Given our society, it is one of the most serious charges you can level. It's just short of murder, torture and forcible rape. Being found guilty of minor mismanagement usually carries both financial penalties and prison terms. Major mismanagement can result in more severe penalties and are even grounds for honor duels. The fact that Remus has his 'condition' would work for you and you could easily put him in prison. To answer your question, I would do nothing. Remus is

approving expenditures to fight a Dark Lord. True, he's probably the old man's scapegoat, but unless you would like to drag the Order's finances into the light of day and send a good man to prison then you are in a no win situation. When you hit seventeen, you can do what you need to do to make them accountable for their actions, or at the very least make sure they have to come through you. If you end up returning to Hogwarts, I recommend you use this as leverage against the headmaster and force him into treating you as an equal, but remember if you go against him on this one it will ultimately be Remus that pays the price."

Suddenly, your omelet tastes more like a shit sandwich. No matter what, the old man gets away with it. The best you can do is screw one of your parent's best friends over.

Bill looks at you sympathetically. "Look at it this way. This is just the Black money. No one can touch the Potter money but you and the goblins. You are still going to be extremely wealthy and the money that is being spent is going to fight the bad guys. Your letting this whole issue distract you from what you should really be mad about."

"You're right Bill. The money isn't that important. Drugging me and messing with my mind is more important."

"There you go, ignore the distractions and stick to the things that matter. Don't forgive it and never forget it." Bill said as the two of you sat down with your full plates. The food is good and filling. You stew over everything Bill has just said. It makes sense.

"Luna must have spotted you in the airport yesterday, but she is going to be in Sweden for most of the summer. I don't think we have to worry. She doesn't know exactly where we are and she realizes that I don't intend to tell her."

Bill looks thoughtful for a moment. "Well there isn't a lot we could possibly do about it either way."

You continue to chat while gorging yourself on the fine breakfast. The three girls from Toronto come in. You briefly catch the eyes of one of them. She is the shortest with wavy hair. The other two have longer

and straighter hair. She flashes you a smile and a wink, which you return with a smile of your own and a slight redness to your face. This causes an eruption of giggles and whispering. Maybe you were better off with love potions? Bill of course hasn't missed a thing.

"My aren't you just the little heartbreaker. Been in town less than a day and already you're attracting fans."

"Yeah right. Shove it."

"Oh be a sport about it, James Black. Part of being on vacation is to experience things you never have before." Bill apparently has a gift for mischief making as well.

You opt to respond in kind. "Well if I do get into anything. I'll try and be a sport and remember the silencing charm, unlike other people I know." There's the Weasley pigmentation you are familiar with.

The two of you finish breakfast and you manage to keep yourself from making eye contact with the females. Though you do manage to catch that the winker is named Amy. They checked in right in front of you and Bill last night and you know they are here for a full week. The best part is none of these girls has any idea about a boy-who-lived.

"Well I see we may have to get you some dressy clothes too." Bill says slyly having recovered from your verbal jab.

Two hours later you have completed your clothes shopping and you look pretty impressive. At least that is what Bill and a couple of salesgirls said. You are simply happy you have more than one pair of underwear. You have to admit you do look good in clothes that actually fit you. Bill said he would be able to drop a couple of charms on them for wand concealment and what not. Better yet, you convinced him to teach you the charms so you could do it. No time like the present to start practicing. After a light lunch the two of you head off to the magical community for some serious shopping.

One of the first stores you hit is a broom shop. As much as you would like to buy another Firebolt, you decide to be discrete and buy a broom called the Dragonfly. It doesn't have nearly the top speed of

even some of the newer Cleansweeps, but it is supposed to be one of the most maneuverable and nimble brooms on the market. It would be a fantastic keeper or beater broom. It handles really well. Maybe Sloper or Kirke would like it. Right now the only thing you would give your team's keeper at the moment is a swift kick in the you-know-what.

You pick up a decent sized trunk, nothing flashy. Most everything will be in the camp tent. Bill told you that it is even bigger than the one you were in at the World Cup. In fact tomorrow, you have to go grocery shopping for six people for a minimum of a week at a time and prepare the menus you are going to use. You are looking forward to being able to use magic in your cooking. You've always been pretty handy in the kitchen and now with some magic; you are going to out do those cooking shows Aunt Horseface used to watch on the telly.

Most of the books are in either Spanish or Portuguese. You do manage to find some books in English. A couple of them are second hand. So you manage to pick up a book on household charms, a beginners guide to ancient runes, a couple of potion manuals and two dueling books. With Bill's old textbooks and the few tomes that came from the Black Manor, you should have ample study material. The only thing you really wanted was anything on apparition. Bill said he would start explaining the theory to you after you get your grocery list and menus together. You do have to earn your keep on this expedition. Many of the other things Bill purchases are interesting. They include items for the campsite like stones that are warded to drive insects and other vermin away, magic lanterns that supply a strong light and various pre-made potions for life in the jungle.

One of the most interesting items you acquired today was a complete set of dragon hide, including the vest, elbow length gauntlets and boots. It was from a Peruvian Vipertooth, the most common dragon breed in this part of the world. They aren't very big and they're flame doesn't shoot very far, but they make up for it with a poisonous bite. In fact bezoars coated in powdered Vipertooth fang are said to be twice as effective as a regular bezoar. Of course by saying they don't get very large, you mean six to ten meters in size. The material isn't as strong as other breeds, but it is more flexible and breathable than

anything short of grapplehorn hide. Bill advised you to compromise protection for speed. One of the other sayings in his vocation is “a slow cursebreaker is a dead cursebreaker.”

Bill takes you to a magical optometrist and has you fitted for Cursebreaker’s glasses. They look and act like standard glasses, but are charmed to allow you to see magic on command. These are about as expensive as your firebolt. He explains that when you are in a tomb, the rule is “looks once look twice then do what ever it is you plan on doing”. Keeping the magic sight on for extended periods leads to a vicious headache and it might temporarily blind you if you fought a duel with the feature turned on. He has the shopkeeper demonstrate with a set of test runes. You see the magic dancing in various shades on the runes. Otherwise the glasses come with sight correction, indestructible, anti-fogging and water repellent charms on them. You ask hopefully if they can see invisible objects. Bill said he has never tried it, but doubts that it would work. It’s not Moody’s eye, but what the heck. It’s better than what you got. Kind of silly that you have never gotten magical glasses before now, isn’t it?

“I’ll teach you the basics. The number one rule is patience. The number two rule is caution. Wrong moves get people injured or worse and whoever created whatever runes or trap you are trying to bypass did not intend for people to get by. Our last stop is to pick up a basic rune carving kit for you to practice on.”

“How much are you intending to teach me?” You ask curious, painfully wishing once again that you had taken Ancient Runes over that stupid course where your death was regularly predicted.

“Hopefully, more than you’ll ever need. Who knows maybe by the time you are done, you’ll forget all about being an auror and want a really exciting job like mine?” The man has an infectious grin.

With shopping finished for the day, the two of you head back to the hotel. Apparating is uncomfortable, especially when someone else is doing it. It requires a certain level of trust. In a way it is like saying, “Please do me a favor, and bring all my body parts with us.”

You slip into your room for a quick shower and disposal of stinky overused boxers. Right after getting out, there is a knock at the door. You throw a towel around your waist and go to see what Bill wants.

“What’s up, Bill?” You ask opening the door. It’s not Bill. She’s short, cute and Canadian. She is also grinning ear to ear at the moment over the blush that is rapidly spreading over James Black’s body. Thankfully, you held onto the towel.

“Um not quite, hi I’m Amy.”

“Har-, I mean I’m James. Nice to meet you.”

“Would you like me to come back in a few minutes? You probably want to put something on?”

In a perfect world you would be smooth and sophisticated. You would look her in the eye and tell her in a husky voice that she is the one that’s not in the right attire and ask her if she would like a towel of her own. Unfortunately what comes out is, “Urm, yeah. That’s er, sure. Come back in a couple of minutes.” Yes indeed, the very picture of sophistication!

You spend the next minute looking for a hole to crawl into, it does not appear. So, you dress. You pick out some of the nicer items from today’s shopping. Maybe, it will distract her from the fact you are such a dunderhead.

Five minutes later, there is a knock on the door. You open it and find Amy on the other side of the door.

“Hello, again. Nice clothes.” She says. You see her appraising you. It rather feels like you are a hunk of meat. You wonder if Hermione feels like this when people don’t even bother to look her in the eyes.

“It’s nice to meet you again, Amy.”

“My sisters and I are going to hit some of the dance clubs after dinner tonight. Wanna come?”



Rather forward isn't she. "What time?"

"Eight"

"Let me check with Bill." You say stepping out into the hall and knocking on Bill's door.

A moment later you are rewarded with the face of Bill Weasley, "What's up?"

You gesture to the young lady standing in your doorway. "Amy has just invited me to go to a dance club with her and her sisters."

"When?"

"Eight tonight."

"Until?"

"Uh, sometime later than eight" You say with a grin.

"I'll lay down a couple of restrictions, but I don't see why not. We need to meet our guests in the conference room in fifteen minutes after we eat and knock out the prelims. After that, you're a big boy, just don't make me regret saying that." He adds with a smile before shutting his door.

You turn back to Amy. "Don't you have to be a bit older to do the dance clubs around here?"

She shrugs her shoulders and looks wistful. "The bouncers down here seem to miss that fact all the time. The upside of being a cute blonde."

"The downside?" She's apparently not shy or modest.

"Everyone assumes I'm an idiot. Plus some of the shop owners like to touch our hair. It happens more in the Caribbean, but it is still kind of creepy."

“That’s not true.” You watch her cock her head at you. Okay it is true. Lavender pretty much would define the ditzzy blonde. Her best friend should be blonde, but for her ethnicity. It’s impossible to take either girl seriously.

“Oh dear, you might not work out. To run with me and the twins, you need to be able to lie convincingly and that was the lamest denial I have ever heard. You’d better work on that. Well, I must be headed off to dinner, Jimmy. See you at eight.”

You watch her head back down the hall to the elevators. Her sisters launch into a giggly interrogation and you see currency exchange hands. You don’t know whether to be flattered or irate. Oh well, you can ask Bill for advice on that later.

Dinner gets served in the conference room. You meet Maria Sanchez. She’s the Mexican cursebreaker. She looks like she is in her mid-forties. She is not exactly attractive. You know now what Millicent Bulstrode would look like if she grew up in Mexico, with a Latino background. Maybe there is actually such a thing as the ‘ugly stick’. If there actually is, perhaps they broke it while beating on her. She also does not appear to be impressed by Bill’s age either. Bill introduces you and she pretty much roles her eyes. It’s a change from having people fall all over themselves in front of you. She obviously thinks you are the Boy-Who-Shouldn’t-Be-Here.

The guide is an American Indian, Lakota Sioux to be exact. He looks very old. If it wasn’t impolite, you’d probably ask. He has a ‘weathered’ look to him. His name is Lone Thundercloud. He seems to have a nice and gentle manner. Of course, you thought that about Dumbledore at one point. Thundercloud at least takes a moment to size you up and then shakes your hand. You can work with him.

You watch as Bill explains their employment contract from Phoenix Expeditions. They perform a confidentiality oath while the waitress is out of the room. Once the oath is performed Bill explains that they will be looking for the “City of the Dammed.” Sanchez roles her eyes and mutters something about ‘at least the money is good.’ The guide looks very thoughtful.

“I was there in my youth. It was a nice magical city. Thirty-five years ago, the city disappeared. There were rumors of a Dark Wizard, who slaughtered the population and was powerful enough to hide an entire city from the world. Many have tried to find it. There are rumors that at least one succeeded, but he came back missing a limb as screaming about it being a Necropolis and that his entire expedition was slaughtered.”

You look over at Bill. He gives you the “we’ll talk about this later” look in return. Your mind is racing. The fact that the guide was once there and no one can remember where the city is. You have a good idea just who that Dark Wizard was. A few pieces of the puzzle come together. It explains why Bill was sent here.

When Sanchez hears that you will be cooking and protecting at night, she snorts derisively. It takes a demonstration of your patronus to shut her up. It’s a good guess that the only thing Hagasauraus Rex will be teaching you is how to keep your temper in check. It wouldn’t be one of your adventures, if someone wasn’t around to irritate you. The guide does a good job of masking his grin.

Two hours later you meet Amy and her sisters in the lobby. Apparently, her sisters shopped locally for their dates. Are you on a date? That’s a really good question. One of their dates, they kept insisting on calling him ‘Rico Suave’ for some strange reason.

Dancing was fun, none of that silly waltz crap. Sure enough the cute blondes managed to get everyone into a club. It was liberating just to go out and cut loose. You don’t have to worry about what the papers will say, or what your classmates would think. Amy is like some bizarre combination of Lavender and the Weasel Wench. She dances with you and damn near everyone else there, like some dynamo of energy and her sisters are just as bad. You do manage to learn that their parents bring them down here fairly often. Their father is an executive at a Canadian pharmaceutical company that has a plant down here. Some of the locals know them by names.

They get you drinking. You’ve only ever had a few tastes of alcohol, mostly at the urging of your dorm mates or Fred and George. After admitting that you are not much of a drinker to Amy and enduring her

calling you a bit of a prude, she goes and gets you her drink of choice Jamaican Rum and Coke. The taste takes some getting used to, but you have decided that you like this drink. After a few of these, you are now dancing with Amy, Amy's sisters and virtually any other girl who crosses your path. You flirt shamelessly. James Black with lowered inhibitions seems to act a bit like Sirius Black. Unfortunately, James Black has at least one too many and ends up transforming into a brooding Harry Potter. Imagine that! You're a brooding drunk. Who would have ever guessed? One of your last memories of that evening is Amy helping you get back to your hotel room. Smooth sophisticated James Black would have invited her in. Brooding and drunken Harry Potter thanks her for the fun and apologizes if you embarrassed her. The last conscious thought on your mind is that your morning probably won't be near as fun.

Authors Notes – Full discussion on Darklordpotter. Next chapter – you get the chance to go grocery shopping while recovering from your hangover. That will go well won't it? Hopefully, Bill knows a good sobering charm. Plus you better start hitting the books and practicing.

Disclaimer – Your head hurts too much to admit that Harry James Potter and all his likenesses including your current disguise, belong to JKR. Why does your tongue feel like you just licked a sock?

Acknowledgements – You'd acknowledge IP82, Sirius009, ChuckDaTruck, Smeagolita and FairyQilan if one of them would help you get to the bathroom or kill whoever is trying to wake you up.

## Chapter 6 – Down by the Waterhole

"Oh looks like somebody had a rough night!" A voice says laughing. You really wish it and the person behind it would go away.

"Guess you didn't pay attention when I said that you probably should avoid drinking any alcohol? Bet you wish you had listened?" The voice is attached to arms, which are shaking you. You pray Voldemort will just come and finish you off now.

"Go away!" You protest in vain. The shaking continues. Your head is throbbing. You try rolling away from the infernal shaking – right off the bed onto the floor. Your highly trained professional grade seeker reflexes fail you as you impact with a nice thick sounding thud. One of your eyes manages to open. You groan. There is no immediate escape. The bed frame goes all the way down to the floor otherwise you could roll under there. The arms are no longer shaking you. They have been replaced with a foot that is prodding you.

You decide to face the music and pray that it isn't too loud. The other eye has managed to open – it's the little victories that are important. Things look more blurry than your piss poor eyesight usually provides. You roll over and use the palm of your hands to push yourself upright leaning back against the nightstand. There in front of you is a blurry, but obviously amused Bill Weasley.

"So how does freedom feel this morning?" He's taunting you. Who the hell does he think he is, Malfoy?

"My head hurts." Three words strung together correctly, it's an improvement.

“I’m sure it does.”

“Can you do a sobering charm?”

“I could, but that would be ruining today’s lesson.” Bill says as you fumble for your new glasses.

“What lesson is that?”

“It’s called ‘just because Bill is a cool guy, doesn’t mean I should go out and get shit faced – especially if I have something to do for the expedition the next day.’”

“Okay, so what’s next?” Damn, no sobering charm.

“Well you get your sorry ass up off the floor, get into the shower and get rid of that stench. Then we go down to get breakfast. Maybe some nice greasy sausage, mmmn tasty.” He says watching you turn green. “Then after you suffer through watching a Weasley eat a large breakfast, we head to the marketplace and along the way I may just let you off the hook and do a sobering charm.”

“Would be quicker to just do one now.” You mutter.

“Ah, but if you want to be treated like a man then, you’ll face the consequences of your own stupidity like one.” Oh crap, Bill just called you out and you’re in no shape to really argue.

There’s only one thing to do, stagger to your feet, grab some clothes and stumble towards the bathroom. Bill tells you he’ll be back in twenty minutes and says that you should drink some water for your headache. It doesn’t help all that much. The shower helps a bit. You feel about the same as any time you’ve ever woken up in the hospital wing at school. You bet Poppy would give you a sobering charm. She’s got a sweet spot for you. Of course once you were sober, you’d have to listen to a lecture so maybe this is for the best. On the other hand it probably wasn’t as bad as her sex-ed lectures at the end of the fourth year. You didn’t pay that much attention, still being a bit upset about an incident in a graveyard, but what you do remember

was it was boring as Binns, creepy like Snape and stern like Professor Kittykat.

Feeling slightly refreshed, you bumble your way through brushing teeth and donning your clean clothes. You still feel like 'Death Warmed Over', but you at least look like 'Death Freshly Heated and Ready to Serve.' You start to lie back down, but one good whiff of the sheets makes you realize the error of that idea. Instead you settle onto the couch by the window and desperately try to grab five more minutes of sleep.

Not thirty seconds after you close your eyes, Bill comes into the room. "And I guess you are ready for some tasty breakfast?"

You stand up still a little wobbly.

"Curious to know how I knew you were ready?" Bill asks. For the sake of not arguing, you simply nod. "Okay, turn on your glasses and look down there." He says pointing at the doorframe to the bathroom about ankle level.

You humor him and turn on the glasses, with only a brief pause to remember how to do it. In the empty space is a thin line of reddish string-like material suspended between four squiggly lines floating in the air.

"What's that?"

"The first thing I am going to teach you when you are capable of learning something today. It is a temporary intruder alarm. Here hold my wand while I cross it. There, feel the wand vibrate slightly. That lets you know that someone or something crossed your ward. Since it was drawn in the air, it won't last but maybe forty-five minutes. Later, I can show you how to carve it into stones and they last much longer. It's also one of the basic triggers to a trap. The runes date back to when the Tigris was the 'Cradle of Life', instead of sending a signal to a wand; it could activate a second set of runes that could make what few seconds of life you have left utterly miserable."

Damn, now Bill is driving the guilt home on you. You're out here to learn things not get falling down drunk. You give him a knowing nod and lean down to get a closer look at the runes in front of you.

"How do you get rid of one?"

"Temporary ones can be cancelled like any other spell. Ones that are carved into stone are a bit harder. The hardest ones to beat are scribed into metal, gemstones and bones of magical creatures. Move your hand through the field a few times. Close your eyes and feel the tingle of the magic as you pass through it. It's faint, but you should be able to feel it. There is no other magic around here, but eventually you can train yourself to sense a ward even in some place like Diagon Alley, which has magic everywhere. Even if you don't have your glasses on, you need to know when you trip a ward. It may save your life or give you time to shield yourself."

"We'll do this again later, after you do the grocery shopping." Bill said canceling the ward in front of you with a wave of his wand. "Come on lets go get some food in your system. Did you at least eat anything while you were drinking last night?"

"Nachos." They were pretty good actually.

"Well every little bit helps." He says guiding you towards the elevator. Once inside he takes a look at you and waves his wand. Your head clears. You feel closer to human than you have all morning. The sobriety charm is actually a derivation of the cheering charm. The gifted instructors at your school refuse to teach it before the seventh year. The seventh years hoard that knowledge like it was their last knut, though the buttnugget twins seemed to be quite proficient with it ever since their fourth year.

"Thanks. I thought you weren't going to do it until after breakfast."

"Nah. You should have gotten the point by now. The girls you went out are probably down there. They'll expect you to look like the walking dead. When they ask you how you are doing, you can tell them about your amazing ability to 'bounce back'. This way, you'll



save a little face and boost your reputation. Consider this a gift, next time I won't be so forgiving."

Sure enough you get three very surprised looks from the blonde trio. You give them a smile and a quick wave as you go to fill up your plate. Bill purposely chooses a table next to the girls. You shake your head as you head on over.

"Well if it isn't the 'Dancing and Drinking Machine'? We weren't expecting to see you at least until early afternoon." It was one of the twins, Heather or Melissa. All three were laughing. You wonder if you could get away with pranking them.

"Good morning." You smile.

Amy looks up. "I have to ask, you were pretty hammered last night. What's your secret?"

"I exercise a lot. It helps, I guess." Pretty lame excuse, but even now you are nowhere near one hundred percent. "So what trouble are you ladies getting into today?"

"Well corrupting innocent British boys was fun. Today, we are going to do some shopping and some of this and some of that. Sadly, we have to go to a dinner for Dad's business, so no dance clubs tonight. How about you? Shopping for your trip into the jungle?" You wonder exactly how much you told her. You can see Bill thinking the same thing.

"Yeah. We're going to see some of the ruins. It's Bill's specialty. We're probably heading out tomorrow."

"Oh too bad. We're coming back in the middle of August if you are still around. I liked your story last night about fighting Dark Wizards much better, but Archeology is cool too."

"Apparently James gets very imaginative when you give him a little alcohol. We'll be in and out between now and October. You can leave a message for us at the desk." Bill says looking at you rather sternly.

You wonder if he is going to cancel out the sobriety charm. Can that be done?

“Yeah that’s a good one, Dark Wizards. Imagine that?” You mumble.

Breakfast continues. The girls were already almost done. They leave. Amy waves and one of the twins blows a kiss at you on their way out the door. You look over at Bill’s disapproving face.

“Do I even need to say how badly you fucked up last night?”

“No, I think I get the picture.”

“Good. I’d hate to oblivate them. If this was England, I would have done it. You might still have a chance with one of them when they come back in August. Just remember this next time someone offers you alcohol.”

“I will Bill. I will.”

After breakfast, the two of you head over to the magical village. Bill stops you and tells you to activate your curse breaking glasses. You see concentric bands of yellow and blue emanating almost ten meters from a pair of stone columns.

“Muggle repellers and notice-me-not charms to keep away the normal folk. Diagon alley and most magical places use these.”

You nod taking a close look at the runes on the two columns. You see a small cluster of runes sending out the yellow and blue. Above them is a different rune with little silver lines running to each one. Six identical runes channeled silver energy into it.

“Bill, what’s that one?”

“That’s the controlling rune. The six around it are the charging runes. This keeps the wards continually powered.”

“How do the charging runes draw power?”

“Most magical sites are on what are called ley lines. The charging runes draw magic out of the ley line. People can also use their own magic to power a charging rune.”

“So Hogwarts is on a ley line?”

“Yes, so are most of the magical schools - Diagon Alley and Azkaban as well. Do you want to know a secret? You ever wonder how come students are so tired coming out of Muggle studies or history of magic?” You wonder where he is going with this.

“Because History is boring and Muggle studies is taught by a pureblood who acts like he knows how they live?”

“Partly, but those two classrooms, most of the dorm rooms and where the house elves sleep have runes carved into them that tap into the magic of the students in the class or sleeping in the dorms. They siphon off a bit of everyone’s magic and power the wards, along with the main power drawn from the ley line. Azkaban works pretty much the same way, with the prisoner’s own magic helping to power the wards that imprison them. Ironical isn’t it? Fortunately, the siphon runes can’t draw that much power from a person. Arithmancers and Rune Masters have tried coming up with a rune that would draw more power, but no one has ever succeeded. I know it sounds sinister, but it’s not really. You’re not supposed to be using magic in those classes and during your sleep. It’s just taking a tiny bit of magic that you rejuvenate quickly anyway, but a tiny bit of magic from four hundred plus people adds up after a while.”

It’s a lot to take in. All the students, who are running around through the year are helping to power the wards of the castle, like little batteries. At this point, you wouldn’t put anything past Albus Dumbledore like ‘borrowing children’s magic’. In fairness to the old geezer, it sounds like everyone else does it.

“So these are what siphon runes look like?” You ask pointing at the six.

“No those are the charging runes that can draw power from the ley lines. They’re similar, but not completely the same. Charging runes don’t need a ley line to draw power, they will just charge slower

based on what ambient magic they can absorb. Most magical traps are powered by charging runes. Ones that aren't directly around ley lines can be overwhelmed, when their discharge rate exceeds their charging rate."

"How many runes are there?"

"Thousands though some are repetitive. Most of the ones you'd see at school are the Norse, Celtic and Egyptian variety, but the Americas, India, Eurasia and the Orient have a whole bunch of different runic types as well."

"You're right. Your job does sound cool."

"Well it's not all fun and games. You spend most of your time carving runes, designing a runic scheme or looking up unknown runes and trying to figure out what they do. Hell, for the first two months I was in Egypt my main job was to set the 'critter wards' up on the bulk transfer system every time they moved large quantities of money from other branches with rodent infestations. I was Bill 'The Better Mousetrap' Weasley."

"Bulk transfer system?"

"It's a portal to move money between branches. For the longest time Singapore and Calcutta had rat problems. It's taboo to kill a rat in some cultures."

"So tell me, what's the best part of being a cursebreaker?"

"Opening a tomb that no one has been in for a long time. The feeling you get when you know that you beat, the wizard or witch that set the wards there. You think quidditch is competitive? Try curse breaking! Some warders leave a signature rune as a trophy, for the day when someone beats their scheme. One of the witches I trained under showed me a signature rune that she had from a tomb she had beaten and I shit you not, she beat Rowena Ravenclaw."

There's Bill's competitive streak! Originally you thought this might be up Hermione's alley, but the more you think about it your traitorous

male ex-best friend would enjoy it too with his love of chess and all that.

“Okay, what’s the worst part?”

“Well working for Gringotts, it has to be everyone thinking I am some kind of effing accountant. Sure, I have picked up some along the way and I know how to run my own finances, but that’s like saying someone who works in a quidditch stadium selling refreshments knows how to manage the team! The twins wanted me to run their books for their business for them. I warned their shop for them, but Merlin I don’t do the books. That’s what the Goblin’s do. I’m a ward crafter not a bean counter. The only reason I know as much as I do, is all my work for Dumbledore. It’s a running joke among us Gringotts cursebreakers; the moment you tell someone you work at Gringotts there is some kind of compulsion that forces whomever you are talking to, to start babbling about their investments and finances. My version of estate planning is how to protect your bloody home from people getting in, not how much to leave to your irritable nephew with the body odor problem. Sorry, didn’t mean to go off on a rant. It’s just a sore spot with me.”

Come to think of it, you always thought Bill was some kind of super wizard accountant. You wonder how many other people suffer from that misconception.

“No problem Bill. If you could do all that and balance the books, why would we need goblins anyway?”

“See that’s exactly what I am talking about!” Bill says glad to have someone agreeing with him.

You turn off your glasses, after starting to feel a twinge of pain at having them on for the five or ten minutes you have been standing here looking at the perimeter wards. Bill shows you the tiny siphon rune on the glasses where it draws on your power to make the glasses work. You add it to the list of things that someone probably should have explained to you long before now. The two of you head into the town to do some grocery shopping and pick up some additional last minute supplies. Bill said he would start working on

apparition with you this afternoon. Walking the last five minutes, he begins explaining the theory behind apparition. It doesn't sound so hard and you have already felt what it is like from the side-alongs you have been doing. With any luck, you'll have it mastered fairly quickly.

You pull out your shopping lists. It's easier to do most of the grocery shopping here rather than in the muggle world. You don't have to keep doing all the currency conversions. Plus there are lots of ingredients that they just don't have in the non-magical world. The economy must be better in England. Your galleons are going much further than you imagined.

Bill shows you how to cast a basic translation spell. It's not prefect, but you can now understand a bit of what is being said around you. Bill tells you to turn on your glasses and look at his ears. You see a faint shimmer of magic around them from the translation spell. Bill goes over to some of the other shops while you do your shopping in the market. There's a good deal of fish and meat. You think of last night's meal of feijoada, a hearty meat and black bean stew. It was very good. You managed to get a recipe for that one and are picking out the ingredients needed to make it along with the other dinners for the first week in the jungle. Bill explained that every weekend, when they weren't moving camp you would be able to portkey or apparate (once you learn how) back here to restock on your provisions. You asked him about being out until October. He said that Dumbledore requested that if there was no real progress by the middle of that month that Bill return to England. You immediately ask him what he is really after out there. Bill told you 'not here and not now', but promised you an answer in private.

"Please Paulo ..." A young woman pleads with the merchant. She is pretty, with straight black hair and bronze skin. She looks like she is in her early to mid twenties.

"I am sorry Karina. I cannot extend you a tab. I know that you are in a bad way, but the Colastos would not be pleased with me if I did."

"Fine, you are the same as all the rest! Begging the favor of that family. I will find another way to feed my boy!" The woman's angry

words cowed the merchant slightly. You wonder about the back story to all this.

“Karina, come back later tonight when I have to get rid of the fish that will spoil before the weekend. It is all that I can do without risking their anger.”

You don't know why you do half the stupid shit that you do. Funbags calls it your 'saving people thing'. Hooknose calls it 'your constant need to inflate your bloated ego'. Nevertheless, you reach into your pouch and pull out a dozen or so galleons. You think about some boy out there, who has a mother willing to beg to get him food. As the young woman turns away from the counter you touch her arm. She looks at you confused with a face flushed full of anger and embarrassment. You press the coins in her hand and see her eyes open wide.

“Take this. Feed your boy.” You say quietly.

“I.... I cannot accept this.” She stammers in English.

“I know what is like to be hungry. Take it.”

She looks into your eyes for a moment. Girls at school always talk about your eyes and how much they like them. You've never seen what the big deal is. They're green. You certainly never have seen the 'windows to your soul' crap they babble on about. Maybe this woman does. She nods, smiles at you, pockets the money and leaves in a hurry.

The merchant regards you carefully as you step to the counter to pay for your goods. He is surprised at the sheer amount of goods you are purchasing. Your bill comes up to a little under nine galleons. From the looks of things you probably gave her about two months of grocery money if she spends frugally.

“You should be careful how you spend you money.” The shopkeeper says quietly while bundling and shrinking you packages.

“Why is that?”

“Karina had protection. She does not anymore. She has displeased a very powerful family with great influence. You are a foreigner, so our ways are unfamiliar. It would not be good for you to meddle in things you do not know about and should not concern yourself with.”

You want to be angry at the man, but his tone is without malice. It's not like Malfoy spouting his usual hate and venom about muggleborn not being allowed in school. He is stating a fact. The man is actually giving you a warning. You slide the sickles and back towards him and drop a galleon on top of it. You smile at him.

“Then it would be best if no one learned of my meddling, wouldn't it?”

The merchant smiles at you and sweeps the coins into his hand before wishing you a good day. You leave market and catch up to Bill, who is waiting for you. He takes the shrunken food parcels and tells you to go down to the magical only beach while he apparates back to the hotel and stores the food.

You walk down to the beach and sit watching the waves crash in. Some of the local boys are playing football on the beach. Dean Thomas would probably have joined in. You were never that good. Too bad you don't see a quidditch pitch around, but then again the Dragonfly is back in your hotel room, so it's just as well. The fresh ocean air does wonders for clearing the last reminders of the previous nights tomfoolery. Your peaceful relaxation is interrupted.

“I wanted to thank you again. You are most kind.” Karina says kneeling next to the rock you are sitting on.

“You're welcome. I don't like the thought of children going hungry.” You say distantly.

“What is your name?”

“James Black.”

“I am Karina Machado.”



“Mama! Mama!” A young boy maybe four or five, comes half running half stumbling across the sand towards the two of you. The neutral expression on Karina’s face melts into a smile as the boy falls into her arms. You watch as she hugs the boy and ruffs his hair.

“Are you having fun out here today, Chico?” You follow her speech though you can tell by the slight delay that the translation spell is now working again.

“Yes! Mama! I am building a sandcastle! It’s going to have a quidditch pitch and a dragon pen! It will be better than the Colastos’s house.” You see her smile falter a little. She removes one of your galleons from her pockets.

“Francisco, go to the ice cream vendor. You may get a scoop of chocolate. I would like a scoop of vanilla in a cup. Make sure to put the change into your pocket. Mr. Black would you like some?” She says switching to English.

“No thank you.” You answer politely. Ice cream sounds good, but your stomach isn’t really up to something sweet. You watch the little boy run to the Ice Cream stand like he is recklessly chasing a snitch. He falls twice and you hear Karina’s warm chuckle as she watches him.

“He is such a handful.” She says sighing.

“Do you think your ice cream will get back intact?” You ask certain that if you had placed an order, at least one would not make it back.

“Oh, Chico is very careful when it comes to his ice cream. He takes his desserts very seriously.”

You watch as the young boy comes back carefully across the sand. Delivering the paper cup containing his mother’s dessert proudly. She rewards him with a kiss on his forehead.

“Francisco, this is Mr. James Black.”

“Mama! Only you can call me Francisco. Everyone else has to call me Chico!” The boy protests causing you to laugh.

“I promise I will only call you Chico.” You say and the boy gives you a toothy grin.

You watch him attack his chocolate ice cream cone with a vengeance. He reminds you of a miniature Ron Weasley, except Chico seems to be more mature. You look back out at the waves and see swimmers splashing while a pair of dolphins leap into the air.

“They are from a large family of animagus. They go down to the regular beaches every now and then to play with the tourists. They are also sources for some of the local legends about shape changing dolphin people, in the freshwater rivers inland.” Karina says. You turn and watch her. For some reason, you are drawn to the vanilla glaze around her lips as you watch her eat her ice cream. You normally like chocolate, but suddenly vanilla looks very tasty. You shouldn’t be thinking about some boy’s mother like this. You’re a bit of a pervert, aren’t you.

“Did I get some on my face?” She asks. Shit you’re busted!

“A little right on the corner there.” You lie as you watch her tongue sweep across her lips removing the glaze. She touches the spot with her finger and asks if it’s gone. You nod like the idiot teenager you are.

“So what are the magical schools like here?” You ask, more interested in trying to look casual than really wanting to know the information.

“We get three years from our government. After that it is up to us to either learn on our own, find someone to teach you, or go to a private school. How about you?”

“We go for seven. The first five are mandatory. You have to pass exams at the end of the fifth to take your sixth and seventh years. At the end of your seventh you take NEWT exams, which help you get a job.”

“What year are you in?”

“I’ll be starting my sixth year this fall, err in September. I guess the seasons are different down here.”

“When does Chico start school?”

“Not until he is ten. I’m counting the days though. I’ll be able to catch up on my sleep then.” She says smiling. Chico had devoured his cone and now had a wide rim of chocolate ice cream on his cheek. “Chico, let me get a cloth to wipe your face.”

The boy responded by taking the front of his shirt and wiping his face with it. “I got it Mama!”

“Oh Chico, you always do that!” Karina said pulling her wand out and using a twisting curling motion. The boy’s shirt peeled itself off of him forcing his arms up into the air.

She then uses a water summoning charm to rinse the stain out of the shirt. The giggling boy makes her spray him with her wand. For the fun of it, you pull your wand out and spray Chico with a jet of water from your wand. Karina’s is a small steady stream. The one from your wand is a strong jet. You pull it away for fear of knocking the boy to the ground. Instead you shoot it into the air and let it rain down on him.

“That is a powerful water charm you have there. You must be a very strong wizard.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize it would come out that strong.”

“Oh, it would have knocked poor Chico back ten feet and he would be begging you to do it to him for the rest of the day. Trust me. Francisco, go back to making your sandcastle. Stay where Mama can see you.”

“Yes, Mama.” You watch Chico run off while Karina lays his shirt out to dry. You ask what charm she used to take his shirt off. She demonstrates it for you and helps you with the wand motions,

explaining that it her grandmother taught her this and many other 'Nanny Charms'. You smile knowing that it has great prank potential. After five minutes you have it mastered including the incantation.

After a minute of silence you ask, "Please forgive me for asking, but the man in the market. He said that you had made some very powerful enemies and that I should be careful?"

"Until two months ago I was the Colastos family governess. The youngest male of the family was named Renaldo. He was Francisco's father. There was a dispute with some of the other families and Renaldo was killed four months ago. Renaldo's wife barely tolerated my presence when he was alive. After his death, the family decided that Francisco and I no longer had a place there. They also ensured that no one else would want to employ me. I returned to the small house my grandmother left me and have been there since. The Colastos's maintain much of the magic that makes Rio such a magical destination for the normal people. They place charms throughout the city to make the tourists feel more enjoyment. The family is well compensated by those in the city that are aware of our presence."

It's a sad story. You could probably top it with the whole Boy-Who-Lived spiel, but this isn't about who has had the worst deal, is it? "That's awful." You are not sure what else to say.

"It is reality." She says simply.

"Hey James." Bill says coming out onto the sand. "Making more friends I see."

"Bill Weasley, this is Karina Machado. Bill is my cousin." You say introducing the two of them.

"Are you ready to try apparating?" Bill asks.

"Sure. Where do you want to do it?"

"How about right over there?" Bill says gesturing to an open area that no one seems to be using.

“Do you mind if I watch?” Karina asks. You wonder if she knows how to apparate. You get the suspicion that she doesn’t.

“No problem,” Bill answers.

Bill begins explaining the theory again and using a stick, he draws two circles about 3 meters apart. He then demonstrates apparating as slowly as he possible can, back and forth between each circle. Next, Bill takes you side along back and forth about five times instructing you to concentrate on the sensation of apparating. He informs you that you need to recreate the feeling, while focusing on your destination.

Finally, he lets you try. You clear your mind, as best you can. It never really worked for Occulmency, but what the hell! You concentrate on finding your magic and recreating the feeling to move yourself from one circle to the next. For five straight minutes you concentrate with nothing happening. Bill interrupts and does side along with you again three more times, before turning you loose to try it again.

Fifteen more minutes in the warm sun and you feel something, a grinding crack followed by pain.

“Shit. You splinched!” Bill says running over to you. You are missing half your left forearm, but at least most of you is over in the destination circle. You stagger over back to your starting point as Bill starts to work on reattaching your arm while you enjoy the feeling of shock coursing through your body. Reversing a splinch is rather painful, but considering the variety of curses you have experienced, it’s not too bad. Karina helps him by holding you steady while he reverses it. It doesn’t help that Chico has moved closer and is laughing at you.

“Mama! He forgot his arm!”

“Chico, quiet! Hold still Mr. Black.”

After reattaching your arm, Bill asks Karina to go get some drinks. She walks off with her son. You sit kind of dumbly on the rock

opening and closing your left hand like you just got a new one. Well, technically you just got it back.

“So what’s her story?” Bill asks.

“She worked for a powerful family. One of them fathered her kid. He died and they didn’t want her around anymore. They also decided that no one else should hire her. Reminds me of certain families back home. I’m guessing she doesn’t know how to apparate. She was in front of me begging the man in the market for a way to feed her boy and I ...”

“You gave her some money.” Bill says smiling and shaking his head.

“Yeah. Sorry, I probably should have minded my own business.”

“You’ve got a big heart. That’s what I like about you, Harry. Just be careful that people don’t use you.” Bill stops for a second. “Actually, make sure that more people don’t use you.”

“I’ll try.”

“If she invites us to dinner go ahead and accept. I’ll stay for a bite and to make sure it isn’t some kind of scam, but I have to go and meet our hitwizard escorts.”

You look confused. A scam? How would that? Why would? That’s not possible, is it?

“Different places, Harry. Different rules. This isn’t even close to some of the shitholes I have been in before, but the real world is a beautiful and dangerous place. I’m going to put a tracking charm on you so that I can locate you.” Bill says sagely.

“Okay.” You feel the tingle of magic as Bill places a spell on you. “You’ll have to teach me that one.”

“I promised to teach you as much as I can. Thundercloud looks like he will help. I wouldn’t bother asking Sanchez. As for the hitwizards,

I'll do my best to convince them. That said, they may not want to have anything to do with you."

"I can live with that. I take it you don't care for Sanchez either."

"She came highly recommended."

"Maybe the person that recommended her hopes she gets killed? Did you say this was a high risk assignment?"

"Good point. Oh looks like your new friend is coming back. How do they keep all the girls off you at school?"

"Mostly through all the rumors and lies that are spread about me. Speaking of which, we should pick up some snakes."

"Huh?"

"My language gift." You say hastily as the mother and son return.

Bill obviously gets it. "Oh that's right. They can get in through cracks and scout ahead. I think I'm going to like having you around."

"I was thinking about using them as guards at night too."

"That would work."

Karina looks confused as she only caught the last bit, but she quickly lets it drop. The drinks taste good. Bill has you wait twenty minutes before trying again. In the meantime the three of you chat and spray water at Chico. Finally, you try again. You make significant progress. If only taking a minute to splinch yourself counts as progress. You fall over in the destination circle and try to hop back to the missing right foot, spitting the sand that got into your mouth out on the way back. You suffer through a second reversal and the pain that accompanies it. Third times a charm isn't it? No, it's not as you turn around to fetch both of your hands. Even Karina is laughing openly at you.

"That's enough for today. I thought you were making progress, but losing both your hands is a definite sign to stop for the day. We'll try

again, or maybe I have our guide work with you after we make camp.” Bill then plays an inappropriate game of keep away with your two hands. He then asks you if you want to play catch or watch him practice juggling. After torturing you, much to Chico’s delight he reattaches your hands.

“Would the two of you care to join us for a home cooked meal?” Karina asks looking at you. Bill’s eyes do a Dumbledore like twinkle as if to say, ‘I told you so’.

“That would be nice.”

“Francisco, take Mr. Black and Mr. Weasley back to our house. I will go get something to prepare for dinner.”

“I won’t be able to stay,” Bill says. “I have another obligation I must attend to.”

You watch Karina walk away. She has a nice way of walking, doesn’t she? After a moment Bill and you follow Chico towards a small group of what can only be described as hovels. The house that shall no longer be named, but belongs to Bill’s family would be a veritable castle. None of them look ‘pretty’. Chico manages to lead you to one of the worst looking ones. You notice Bill checking with his wand and shaking his head as Chico leads you in.

“What?” You have to ask.

“Nothing.”

“Huh?”

“Exactly. Nothing! Not a single ward at all. No visitor wards, no identifier wards, no wards at all. I’m not even sure the place has any preservation charms on it.”

The inside is clean and appears well kept. The furniture is old, crude and in the case of two of the chairs – about to fall apart. It has one main room, which serves as a living room, kitchen, dining room and



master bedroom. There is a small bedroom, which appears to belong to Chico and a bathroom.

Chico insists on showing you his toys. Some of them look new and somewhat expensive. It was probably all they were allowed to take when the Colastos family kicked them to the streets. You wonder how long before Karina will be forced to sell them. Bill steps outside while you entertain Chico. About fifteen minutes later Bill and Karina come inside. She seems embarrassed about her living conditions, but launches into some serious cooking charms almost immediately. She's making a fish dish. It already smells pretty good.

Bill hands you a smooth shaped rock with a big grin on his face. "Portkey back to the alley behind the hotel. The activation phrase is Splinch Me."

"Oh that's hilarious. You should have been a comedian."

"I'll come over when you get back and we'll talk about the expedition and what we are after when you get back. Okay, I've got some wizards to meet. Let me get some coins from your pouch. I'm a little short right now." Bill says taking your money pouch and removing most of the currency. He raises his voice, "Karina, Chico it was nice meeting you."

Bill apparates away and you watch Karina work the kitchen. She is quite good. She offers to show you some of the charms. You take her up on the offer and almost immediately regret it as she slides behind you hooking her arm around your waist and holding your wrist. Somehow it seems a bit more intimate that whenever any female has assisted you with spell casting. Then again, the people assisting you usually consisted of Hermione and Professor Kittykat. You've only recently started thinking about Hermione that way and hell will freeze over before you entertain those kinds of thoughts about your transfiguration teacher. It's hard to concentrate.

"No. That is not quite it. Here switch with me." She says sliding around in front of you. You try and stand awkwardly behind her. You remember during some of the DA meetings that some of the girls, namely Lisa Turpin, Hannah Abbott, Ginny the wonderslut, and a

fourth year Claw named Marcia would freeze every time you were behind them and touching them. You think you know the reason why now.

Karina grabs your arm and puts it around her waist. Her shirt is a little short and a portion of your hand ends up on bare skin. "You have a very strong grip, James."

You lean into her to avoid pressing your waist into hers. There are things going on south of the border that you don't want to think about right now. After a couple of tries, you stammer that you are pretty sure you know how to cast that particular charm now, even though you don't exactly know the incantation, wand movements or what the purpose was to begin with. Is it warm in here or is it just you?

Recovering your dignity or at least a tiny portion of it. You sit at the table and watch her continue to cook. Two meters is a much safer distance to watch from. You make small talk about the types of spells she was taught. Apparently, nothing really destructive is taught in their basic schooling. She does know the patronus mist, to drive off lethifolds and her most offensive spell is the basic cutter diffindo.

Dinner consists of fish on a rice bed and steamed vegetables. It is very tasty. Karina whips up a lemon butter sauce to drizzle over the fish. You feel a bit guilty that she is going to all this trouble just to feed you with money that she should be hoarding to feed Chico. You make certain to compliment her on everything. She smiles at the flattery and thanks you for helping clear the table. After dinner you and Karina play a board game for an hour with Chico, who seems to be having a wonderful time. After three games, Karina sends him off to the bathroom and then to bed. She kisses the boy goodnight and puts him in his little room. After shutting the door, you watch her use a silencing charm on Chico's door.

"Would you show me some of your spells?" She asks.

Her expression makes it hard for you to refuse. You transfigure a paper plate into a target and show her the arrow curse. She struggles with it. You realize her wand is second or third hand and probably doesn't suit her well. Even with a proper wand you doubt she would

ever give any of the DA members a run for their money, but she is enthusiastic in her efforts. When she manages to cast the curse successfully and hit the target she jumps up and down excitedly and pulls you into a hug. You ask to see her shield and her form and the result were awful. You work on correcting her stance and her form. At first, her spell doesn't work at all; it was almost like tearing down what she learned and starting from scratch.

It takes about thirty minutes and you seem to forget your discomfort around her. You're in familiar territory, teaching someone how to defend herself. She's a willing student, but with very little to work with. Still, her shield is much better by the end. It should actually block something now. She has a bit of sweat on her forehead from her efforts.

"That last one was much better. I think you have it now. We should stop. You look worn out. Coming from a guy who managed to splinch himself three times today, that is saying something."

Karina envelops you in a hug and whispers into your ear. "Thank you so much!" You feel the caress of her lips across your cheek. She moves across your frozen lips. You're not imagining this. Hot Mama is kissing you! Still a bit creepy, but no time to worry about that. Stop standing there like a statue and do something! You start kissing her back and feel her hands moving up and down your back. Your arms start working on autopilot as you concentrate on kissing Karina. You start wondering if she sent Chico to bed early or if this is his normal bedtime. She's grinding against you and breathing heavily. You don't want her to feel how you are responding, but her hands pull your waist into contact with her and press your naughty bits into rather close proximity.

She breaks away from you and steps back. "James, use the charm I taught you this morning."

What charm did she teach you this morning? How in the hell is she expecting to you to remember something like that? The only thing you remember is when she showed you the charm to take Chico's shirt... . Oh that charm! You start to point your wand at her and stop.

“We shouldn’t do this.” You can’t think of a real reason why at the moment. You are pretty sure that one of you is required to make this lame denial.

“Please. The last year of Renaldo’s life, he tried to make nice with his precious Nina and he would not touch me. He wouldn’t let anyone else touch me, either. Now that I have been cast out no one will touch me. I liked to be touched. I want to be touched. Please touch me.”

Now that’s what you call a convincing argument! You cast the charm and watch her shirt rise off her body. She’s not wearing a bra either. She should really have cooling charms in this house, well actually certain parts of her look like they are cold.

“Now for your next lesson, use the same charm, but focus on my skirt.” It’s not the Imperius curse. You could resist that. This is something completely different. You cast the charm again with a lump in your throat. Well there are other lumps elsewhere too! She raises her wand with a wicked smile on her face and your shirt lifts off your chest. She casts again and the shorts remove themselves.

“I’ll show you another charm I know.” She moves her wand across her lips and they glow slightly. Her lips tingle when they touch yours. The feeling is, well you are sure that if you had some time to really think it through, you could come up with something really descriptive. For now you just have to settle for good, really good, damn good or don’t stop doing what you are doing good.

She’s touching you all over. You should reciprocate, shouldn’t you? Holy Merlin! She just touched you there. You nearly jump out your boxers. Her hand is not moving away from that area either. She brings her wand to your lips and says the same incantation. You the same tingle across your lips and she pulls your head down to her breasts. Your new name is Harry “The Funbag Inspector” Potter. She pulls you down onto the couch.

The next three hours pass in a blur as Karina show you things. You don’t last very long from just her touching. She apparently expected that. The spell she just taught you is called the Icy Lips charm. She asks you to apply it and shows you how to kiss her down there. You

follow direction well. Karina seems to really enjoy it. She's getting very descriptive about how much she likes it. This must be what the silencing charm was really for! Turnabout is fair play and she doesn't last very long either. She reapplies the spell to her lips and start kissing you – down there. This is starting to sound like one of those stupid articles Dean and Seamus would read from their periodicals. They usually start with, 'I never believed it could happen to me...'

It's about one am when you finally get back to your hotel. You shared an awkward goodbye with Karina. She told you, that it would be okay if you came by to see her again. She thanked you for 'touching her'. You've got a stupid grin on your face, don't you? You left the rest of your coins on the counter, while she was in the loo. They'll do more good there.

You knock on Bill's door. He opens it and looks at the clock on his nightstand. "Just getting back, Harry?"

"Urm, yeah."

"Did you have – fun?"

"Yeah."

"Come on in. Grab a seat"

You see Bill was still awake. There are several maps on the table and more than a few books open. You sit down. Bill looks over at you grinning.

"She rode you like a cheap broomstick didn't she?" Your cheeks flush and you can't seem to get rid of the stupid grin.

"Uh, yeah. I guess you could say that."

Bill's smile disappears. "Did she use the contraception charm?"

Your stupid grin disappears. "I don't... I don't know."

There's a pause. Bill looks at you with concern. You're pretty stupid aren't you? "Relax Harry, I made her do it before I left. Right before the two of us came inside."

"You knew what was going to happen?" Suddenly, you realize why Karina seemed a bit flustered when she came in with the groceries.

"I had a good idea. I've been around. You're not stupid Harry. You are ignorant. It's a wild world beyond Hogwarts. Some good things, some not so good. I'll do my best to show you – not just magic, but show you things about life."

"How did you know?"

"She was eyeing you like a side of beef. You'll have to learn how to pick up on things like that."

"I guess I'm a bit thick, when it comes to that."

"No worries. Hell, for the amount of money you gave her she probably would have done us both."

"What? She isn't a ..."

"No. She's not. She's a very grateful mother. Did she say she wanted to see you again?"

"Yes."

"Then it probably wasn't just about the money. You gave her the rest of your money didn't you?"

"I left it on the counter, while she was in the loo."

"That's why I took most of it before I left." Damn! How does Bill know all these things?

You are hit with the realization that you pretty much just paid for sex. It's a sobering moment. You don't feel young and innocent any more. It's a lot to digest.

“Lets change the topic, Harry. I’m going to tell you why we are here. Harry, have you ever heard of a Horcrux?”

Author’s notes – As always join the discussion thread up on Darklordpotter(dot)net. I have to take a break from writing to study for a very intensive professional certification exam. For you computer geeks out there it is the CCIE Written, so you know it’s not a walk in the park! I have to be done with it before July 24th. So, the regular updates to both my stories will recommence at that time. If I get some free time from studying, you may see an irregular update before then, but I am making no promises. Sorry, but Network Engineering pays the bills. – Jim

Disclaimer – You are Harry Potter. Sadly someone else owns your rights. Maybe if you ever get control of this fortune you supposedly have, you can hire a good lawyer and try and get your rights back from this JKR woman. Until then, it sucks to be you.

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## Chapter 7 – Drunk Every Friday

Dear Harry,

Well now that you mention it, Barry Potter sits in the middle of my candle shrine to you. Now if you will kindly send some hair, blood and toenail clippings, I can complete my ritual. Please remove any nasty stuff from the toenail clippings. Hopefully, you aren't that gullible! Actually, Barry is on a shelf above my dresser. We never did marry, but if rumors are to be believed Barry may have cheated on Ginny with me once or twice in a torrid affair. After all, he was my stuffed animal!

How is freedom today? Sweden is beautiful! I am currently catching a rather nice sunrise and writing you instead of writing a History of Magic essay. You know something has always been bugging me, how does Binns grade our essays if he is a ghost? Maybe a house elf shuffles the papers for him. Guess we shouldn't let that slip to Hermione. Then again, maybe we should tell her that and watch her get all bent out of shape! It'll be fun.

Me and Ronnieknis! Oh, hell no! Looney flirts with him because it yanks Hermione's chain something fierce and poor Ronald wouldn't have the faintest idea what to do with a girl that is interested in him and not cooking him dinner. He is about as thick as you can get and I am glad that you can't see the 'real me' and him together either. You should see how skittish Anthony Goldstein is around me. He's convinced Looney is stalking him – paranoia is such a wonderful thing!



How did the shopping trip go? You'll have to forgive me, but I think I rate more than just a simple T-shirt. Better come up with something better than that Mr. Boy-Who-Lived! That said if you see anything that Looney might want or would fit in with her by all means pick it up. Since you say that you are near a beach, a nice seashell necklace would go well with Butterbeer caps, corks and radishes.

Well that's about all for now. Go get into trouble, it's what you do best.

Luna

PS – It's been a day and a half since I wrote this. Don't make me go all "Looney" on you! Write soon – or else!

Yup. The girl is a whack job. No doubt about it. When you think about it, she does manage to baffle Ron and irritate Hermione to no end. The knowledge that she is doing this on purpose makes it that much more amusing.

Closing the journal you take a look around the kitchen of the camp tent. It's a little cramped, but you can work with it. Right now you have a stew cooking and some bread in the oven. You take a moment to reflect on your first two days out in the jungle. It's not as hot as you expected, which is a good thing. There are more bugs than you expected, which is not so good. Sanchez actually found a way to make you realize that a female can be a prick after all!

Your studying has gone well. Thundercloud was trying to help you with your apparition. You seemed to have had a bit of a mental block. He was getting very philosophical on you, when the Korean hitwizard Kwan took it upon himself to help you past your little mental problem.

"You! Boy! Apparate now!" The Korean didn't mince words. He pretty much sliced and diced them. His 'Engrish' is pretty hard to understand. Mentally, you picture Kwan, Fleur and Hagrid trying to have a conversation about how to speak proper English with their horrible accents. You close your eyes and concentrate on the feeling of moving yourself from one spot to the other. If you were a member of the round table, your name would have been Sir Splinchalot. The

strange thing is you almost never repeat which body part you leave behind.

“Crucio!” The spell breaks you out of your reverie as it slams into you and knocks you off your feet. The agony lasts only a brief second, before the hitwizard cancels the spell. He obviously wasn’t really wishing you pain. You look up at the short wiry man and wipe the spit from the side of your mouth. It wasn’t in the Dark Tosser’s league, but it still hurt like nobody’s business.

“What the hell did you do that for?” You scream.

“You think too much! It’s why you fail. Now get up and apparate! Each time I add a second to my spell. Don’t want to be hit with it, then don’t be where I cast it. Crucio!” It wasn’t fair you weren’t ready for it!

The little fucker managed to get up to eight seconds before you finally got it right. Once you got to the other circle and realized everything else was with you, you sneered at him.

“Good now we do again. Back to one second. Crucio!” At least the sadistic bastard smiled this time. He never got above five seconds after that.

After four consecutive times where you had successfully dodged him, Kwan looked up and smiled again. “Enough. You will hurt soon enough from doing all that apparition. Take a pain potion and start my lunch. We will do this again tomorrow. I add two seconds each time tomorrow.”

Kwan was right. You spent the rest of the day in agony up with ‘Apparater’s Cramps’, which are supposedly a bit more painful than most female’s monthly visitor, but nowhere near the pain of childbirth. He had the balls to mock you at both lunch and dinner. The little Korean was willing to teach you, but damn if his lessons didn’t make you suffer. The other hitwizard, Jacob Collins hadn’t really taken any interest in your education. Hell, up to then Kwan hadn’t either! You thanked him the next day and were surprised by his response.

"If you can't apparate, you are a liability! I'm not risking my life to save a stupid cook who can't apparate! Now draw circles! We begin again."

Two hours later, you are hunched over the dining table gritting your teeth as you deal with your second bout of 'Apparater's cramps and trying to catch up on your writing.

Dear Luna,

First, let me apologize for not getting back to you in two days. I have been really busy. I cook three meals a day for six people and stay up from ten at night until two in the morning. The group has told me that I will make someone a wonderful 'wife' someday, so I guess my cooking passes muster. Our other night watchman wakes me up at six, so I can start the cooking all over again. I can't tell you how much I am looking forward to the weekend! I usually catch about three hours of sleep after lunch. So, not a lot of time for me to get into trouble, but I am sure I will manage somehow.

I finally got the hang of apparating at least the short distances. I have a sadistic hitwizard to thank for it. Thanks to his tender care, I don't splinch myself anymore. He said I was thinking too much. I know you are probably laughing right now, but I never thought it would happen either! I am getting an education on runes and warding. I wish I had taken them instead of divination. I am learning how to carve some basic runes into sandstone right now. My tutor says we will move on to harder materials later. It's tough going, but so far I have six intruder ward stones that cover about a five square meter area. I actually saw a small lethifold last night and had to drive it away with my patronus. It was kind of weird like a little floating grey black carpet. The real intruder wards picked it up, but I think mine would have caught it before it reached the tent. Our guide saw it too, he at least complimented me on my patronus, but he said that I should have waited to see if it would come further into the camp first. I guess a bright white light in the darkness of the jungle can attract unwanted attention from things that aren't driven off by a patronus.

The guide is an American Indian. He is also an eagle animagus. It would be nice to learn how to be one, but I already have so much to do this summer. He has been showing me some practical

transfiguration and a couple of really useful charms, when I haven't been incapacitated with Apparater's cramps. Believe the stories. They're as bad as everyone says! He showed me a vision charm that allows you to see heat patterns like Goblins do underground. It's dead useful in a pitch black jungle. I really could have used it back in the Chamber of Secrets! I'll put in the wand movements and the incantation below for you to try sometime. Don't do it during the daytime!

The best part about being out here is I don't feel my connection to El Dorko Lordo anymore, sorry, that's what I am calling him lately. I haven't slept this well in years. It almost makes up for my piss-poor sleeping habits. The rest of our party pretty much leaves me be. There busy checking out some ruins and whatnot. It would be nice to go with them, but there is only so much I can do in a day. I wish I had brought Dobby along. When I am not studying Runes or practicing apparation, I am making some nice headway on sixth and seventh year defense textbooks and a couple of old dueling manuals I picked up along the way. Gee, I really didn't bring my summer assignments along with me. I am so disappointed. Can you tell how disappointed I am?

So far it hasn't been much of a vacation, but I feel like I am learning more after two days in the jungle than two weeks at school. I do hope you are having a nice relaxing time in Sweden. Sorry, there will be no blood, hair or toenail clippings. That's disgusting by the way. Hope this doesn't ruin your little ritual.

Your friend,

Harry

With that you write the Infravision incantation and diagram the wand movements for her to see. It takes you another ten minutes, but you bet she'll like it if she can find a way to try it out without getting a nasty owl from Hopkirk. You wonder if that damn witch enjoys her job making sure little children can't perform magic? You add her to the list of people who's asses need kicking just on principle alone.

You notice your letter makes no mention of three Canadian girls or Karina. It's not exactly casual conversation with a friend of opposite sex. 'Oh yeah Luna, my first night here I got pissed and some little blonde had to get me back to my hotel room and the next night a woman ten years older than me showed me how to do the nasty.' Nope, not exactly an item for casual conversation. Plus you don't kiss and tell. Up until Cho, you didn't kiss either. You wonder if you should see Karina on the weekend. It's actually been bothering you. If you go back, does that make her a whore? Bill doesn't have any good answers for you on this one. He merely recommended that if you go and see her, to not offer any money and not talk about it unless she brings it up. So much for Mr. I have all the answers.

The cramps have cleared up and you are able to stand without pain again. You wonder if Mr. Kwan would appreciate some habeneros to spice up his stew this evening. Looking at your watch you go over to wake Thundercloud from his nap. The wrinkled Indian sighs as he slips out of his hammock. He's just a little shorter than you are, maybe five foot sevenish or so.

"Thank you, James". He says stretching and stifling a yawn. You pour him a cup of coffee. He likes it black and strong. He even jokes and calls it his 'Injun Cleaner'. You didn't really get the joke, but it must be funny. "So what do you plan on doing today? Perhaps some rune carving or planning to blow a few more trees into splinters? You work very hard for someone so young. I wonder what a wizard your age needs with Occulmency?" Damn, he must have seen you reading one of the books from the Black Library.

"It can never hurt to learn about something?" You reply casually, trying not to look concerned.

"You are correct, but I have been watching you. You work yourself harder than any of my children or grandchildren ever have. Your eyes tell me you have seen both battle and death. I suspect our hitwizard friend expected you to give up after a few quick Crucios, but you kept getting back up. You did well and earned a measure of respect from him. I have felt that curse, too many times in my life to subject

someone to it as a teaching aid, but Kwan's technique was most successful. So, why are you interested in the mental arts?"

"A teacher at my school recommended it to me for emotional control." It wasn't a lie. It wasn't really the truth either, but who's keeping score anyway.

"I see. How has your studying gone?"

"Poorly. I can't seem to get through the initial exercises of clearing my mind." You picture Snape's scowling face in your mind enjoying your admission.

"Young people, especially young wizards often have a difficult time with emotional control. You have a powerful patronus, which speaks of a deep connection to your emotions. Magic driven by a strong emotion can be very powerful. Perhaps you are not meant for the arts of the mind. Tell me do you have any animagi in your family lines?"

"My father was one – a stag like my patronus. Why?" You say hoping this conversation is headed in the direction of becoming an animagus.

"Animagery is driven by strong emotions. It is powerful magic. The ultimate in identifying with the beast that lurks inside us all."

"One of my teachers at school is an animagus. She said that it is a controlled discipline."

"Ah yes, the Europeans can take something as raw and primal as the change and turn it into some kind of meticulous process, where you must diagram yourself and make models. Then you spend weeks partially transforming yourself bit by bit. It amazes me that people actually listen to the foolish Europeans."

"You mean there is another way?"

"If you follow their way almost anyone can become an animagus with enough time and dedication. For those of us who are ready and feel the pounding of the animal within us there is the ritual of release."

“How do you know if you are ready?” You ask.

Thundercloud reaches inside his shirt and unties his necklace. It is a wooden carving of an eagle. Instead of a chain, it uses what looks like a long string of leather. “Animages from my people often create a totem. It contains a bit of myself and my animal spirit within. The wood is from the same type of tree as my wand. It is stained with sap from the same type of tree as my wand, my blood and the blood of my first kill in my eagle form. The sinew of that same groundhog creates the fastening. A totem is a powerful relic of blood and nature magic. If one who is not ready for the change touches my totem, they will feel a hint of magic and discomfort but mostly nothing. If one is ready for the change, the animal spirit in my totem will sense your animal and strike out at you. To most, I would say it is painful, but considering I watched your lessons with Mr. Kwan I will say that it is mildly annoying. Do you wish to know if you are ready, James?”

If there was a mirror around, you suppose you’d have the hero look on your face. The ‘come on, give me your best shot – I can take it’ look. You hold your hand out palm up and he drops the carved figurine into it. There is a flash of blinding light and you hear the screech of an angry eagle and you fight the urge to howl in anger as you are thrown violently out of your chair.

Thundercloud reaches down to the ground and retrieves his totem. He carefully buffs it with a cloth and returns it to his neck. “You had a most interesting reaction. You are ready. This is why your Occulmency fails. Occulmency is about emotional control. True animagery is about emotional release. When two forces wage a battle in your body, ultimately it is you that will lose. Only after you have accepted the animal that dwells within your spirit can you attempt to control your emotions, but once you have mastered your animal and emotions, those who would invade your mind will also have to face your animal and its fury.”

“When can we do this ritual?”

“When we break for the weekend I will return home to gather the potions and medicinal herbs you will need to purify yourself with, they are quite potent. We will need to speak with William and get his

permission to bring you with me the following weekend. If he agrees, you will purify yourself next week and accompany me for the weekend to where my people perform the ritual of release.”

“Will I make a totem?”

“It is your choice? What wood is your wand?”

“Holly”

“If you are a predator, we will keep your first kill and I can assist you in making one. If you are not a predator, you can still make a totem, but the process is different.”

“How do you know which one you will be?”

“When you held my predator totem, did you want to fight or flee?”

“Fight. Definitely fight.” You say remembering the anger you felt.

“Then you are a predator. Otherwise you would have felt the urge to flee from my predator.”

“What about rats or insects?” You ask thinking of two you happen to know well.

“Perhaps I generalize too much. You can define the different animal types however you wish, Predator or Prey, Carnivore, Herbivore or Omnivore. The Herbivores and most Omnivores would be driven back by my strong predator spirit. The animal inside you was not driven back. It must also be a strong predator. I have not dealt with many insect animages in my time. They are quite rare and if I may say, there is something wrong about the ones I have met.” No arguments there from you. You’re not exactly going to jump in there and defend Rita’s honor. Naturally, you worry that you are now going to be an insect animagus.

“Can I ask a question?”

“Certainly.”



"Is it animage or animagus? If you have more than one animage is it animagi?"

"Mr. Kwan is right."

"What?"

"Sometimes, you do think too much." Thundercloud says. He could have at least answered your question.

"Is there anything I should do now?"

"No more Occulmency. I will need money for the herbs and potions and my people would look fondly on a donation for their assistance, five hundred galleons perhaps."

"I'll push it through Bill. He'll agree." You say knowing it's your damn money anyway.

Speaking of Bill, he walks in with Sanchez. They are arguing already. You think the hag would know when to shut up already. This is the third argument that you know of, Merlin only knows just how many go on down in the ruins, but so far Bill has been right every time.

You see an exasperated look on Bill's face. "Look, I don't want to break that ward scheme until I have a clear picture of what is happening. Lets grab some lunch and clear our heads. Every other CG bought it from the green Erlz-Taz-luz combination. The last CG was hit by something purple."

"Its an old scheme, the Erlz rune is worn out and no longer charging. We've simply moved on to the next line of defense. We're never going to get anywhere, if you don't have the cajones for this!" Sanchez hissed. She probably does have cajones and you sure as hell don't want to check.

"Then it's a damn good thing that I am in charge and you're not, Ms. Sanchez." Bill replied in a cool tone. He decides to change the topic.

“Smells good, cookie. Is it ready?” You hate that nickname and Bill knows it.

“Yes, and for the last time don’t call me that.” You reply.

Bill just grins at you and serves himself a bowl of your beef stew. You thickened it up with some rice and it does smell rather good. Collins wanders in with Kwan behind them, the two have worked together before. You thought about asking for details and then thought better of the idea. Neither of the men are very vocal. It must be part of the trade. They also don’t really speak of their adventures either. If there is a no bragging rule, that pretty much rules out Malfoy and Ronnikins ever becoming Hitwizards. Funny how similar the two are becoming to you. Makes you wonder how things would have happened if you had shook the little bastard’s hand in your first year. Who knows Tracey Davis has slightly bushy hair. Maybe they would have been your sidekicks? Yeah right!

There’s something to do if you go back to good old Hoggy Hogwarts – Item 1, get new sidekicks. Right now Luna is in, maybe Neville, or perhaps Katie Bell. Item 2, make old sidekicks and their lemon drop sucking puppeteer’s lives a living hell. Item 3, kill a nearly immortal dark lord.

You think back to Bill describing a Horcrux. After your discussion with Thundercloud, you wonder if a Horcrux isn’t some kind of perversion of the animal totem process that you just had explained to you. You could see the logic. Bill had remembered a story from that instructor who managed to break Rowena’s warding scheme that she had managed to recover a scrying glass that belonged to Madame Ravenclaw. It was stolen from her in the late 1950’s, by someone roughly matching ickle Tommikin’s description. Apparently, the unstable sheep fucker has a thing for items that belonged to the Hogwarts founders. Turns out Tom’s diary was one too, which is almost as disturbing as the idea that when he tried to kill you he was probably trying to make one as well. At least one has been destroyed, but who knows how many more he has?

Anyway, El Dorko Lordo and his minions (Why does he get minions and all you get are sidekicks?) massacred an entire Brazilian magical

town and made it disappear from the face of the Earth. If there was anyplace on this planet that screams, "Put Horcrux here!" This would be it. The trick is finding a way into it. Only one man is rumored to have gotten in and returned from 'The City of the Damned' and lived. He is also resting comfortably in an asylum in Sao Paulo, from what you have heard.

"Bill, what is a CG?" You say clearing the mental cobwebs out of your head.

"Curious George, you know like the children's story. You take an object and transfigure it into a little monkey. You put the monkey under a compulsion curse and make it do what you want, typically a cursebreaker will make a CG walk into a ward scheme and watch it die, which we have done about seven times this morning. Come on down with me to the ruins and I'll give you a demonstration." You hear Sanchez's snort of derision. "That's okay cookie, Ms. Sanchez will be staying here to look up several runes to verify that they are what we think they are."

You usually take a quick nap after lunch, but this sounds much more interesting. "Sure, I'll go. I've got enough stew for lunch and dinner, so my afternoon is free."

You practically inhale your bowl of stew. It would be nice to see something other than the campsite for a change. The ruins are about a half a kilometer away.

"So my young apprentice, ready to Bungle in the Jungle?" He says quoting a famous song – one of your favorites.

"Well that's alright by me." You reply not missing a beat.

The two of you set off on a quick hike through the trail that was cleared to the hidden ruins. You pass by the set that had been long since picked over. Bill shows you the wide arcing cutting curse nicknamed 'The Machete' that was used to help clear the path. It's a weak cutter, but useful for clearing vegetation away. This new set of ruins is covered in vegetation, some of it magical in nature. Sprout never said anything about South American Blood Vine! You get to try

out the Machete spell sooner than you thought you would! The blood vine beats a hasty retreat under your and Bill's combined assault. You make a note that if you do go back to England to bring some cuttings for Neville. He'd probably get a kick out of it. You need better hobbies. Other than quidditch what hobbies do you have? Oops, better get back to driving off man eating plant. There it's gone now.

"Place is overrun with this crap." Bill says stomping on a couple of the larger vine bits that were still thrashing about before vanishing them altogether.

While Bill shows you the entrance and discusses the perimeter wards that they easily bypassed, except for the one that releases the scent of blood, which brings the blood vine running – if a vine can run that is.

"Why don't you destroy that ward as well?"

"It keeps the other predators out. Blood vine is pretty easy to beat as long as you don't let it overwhelm you, but now that we are passed it, the vine will actually protect us from the jungle."

"Oh, that makes sense."

You begin to explain to him about becoming an animagus. He says no problem, even at the five hundred galleon price tag, but he wants a try at holding the totem as well. When you describe Thundercloud's totem, you mention your thoughts on how it might compare to a horcrux.

"It sounds plausible that it was a perversion of that process. Hopefully, it will have a reaction for me. I always wanted to be an animage."

"So is it animage or animagus?" You ask hoping Bill will provide a meaningful answer.

"Yes." Bill says clearly not helping. Where's Minnie when you need her? "Alright, here were the first set of wards that we eliminated. They were located here, here and here. Basic intruder detection and ward wake up for the main defenses. What they basically do is alert the

next set of wards that someone is here. If you are good and lucky, sometimes you can knock out the alert wards and get a jump on the next set of wards. In this instance, I am cursed to work with the playtroll centerfold and we tripped the alert wards. These are the next set that we have been working all day on. Stay about four meters back.”

You like Bill’s dig at Sanchez. Bill points his wand at a pile of rocks and you watch as the first one changes into a sprout arms, legs, a head and a tail and turn into a little red furred monkey. He immediately cast a second spell and the jittery monkey stops and looks glassy eyed.

“Meet Curious George. Don’t get too attached, he’s about to meet a bad end.” Bill directs his controlled creature down the hall and tells you to turn on you glasses. You see the shimmer on the wall ahead of you and a green light reduces George to a smoking pile of ash.

“The rune isn’t charging anymore my ass.” Bill mutters. He then demonstrates the weak animal compulsion curse that he uses to control his monkeys. Next he changes two more rocks into monkeys and allows you to control one of them. “Sometimes, I use two and send them one right after the other, the second one is Peeping Fred after my other brother. When two go together, you can see how fast the ward scheme recharges or if it has to move on to the next set of runes. It is one of the ways that you can see if you are overwhelming a ward scheme.”

“They die a lot don’t they?”

“It’s an emotional release from having to grow up with the two of them. Since, I can’t kill the real ones, this has to do. It helps though.” Bill answers with a grin.

Bill sends Curious George in again with you sending Peeping Fred right behind him. The green light zaps the monkey in the front and the second one instinctively leaps away to the right. Out of the corner of your eye you see a brief flash of white light hit the dodging monkey from the wall to the right of it. A massive purple blast vaporizes the

monkey and the two piles of ash and has you seeing stars from behind your glasses.

“I probably should have said not to look directly at the runes, shouldn’t I?” Bill says innocently.

“Yeah, jackass. What was the little white streak from the wall over there?”

“What white streak?”

“When Fred dodged, there was a little jet of white that hit him right before the fireworks started.”

“Really? I’ll be damned! The white light must be a trigger for the purple. Show me where.” You use your wand like a muggle flashlight using the focus luminos incantation to create the effect.

“It came out from there.” You say shining your wand light at what looks like a mouse hole.

“If they used a trigger then you and I might be able to bring this one down right now. Did you see a change around Fred when it hit?”

“He glowed yellow and then vanished in a purple Armageddon.”

“Yellow huh – probably an aura painter. Step outside and levitate a big rock in here. If I am right, we can’t hit it with an aura painter of our own and send it at the archway. The wards should blast away at it and drain them. It might take a few rocks, but they won’t stay up too long. Come my little apprentice there is much work to be done.”

You return with a rock that weighs a bit more than you. Bill tells you to float it down the hall towards the wards. It stops about two meters away from the arch. “That’s expected. Most wards have a defender ward that prevents you from just tossing a boulder into it and destroying the stonework. Hold it right there. I am going to hit it with an aura painter. Make sure your glasses are off.”

Bill waits a second and hits it with a spell and sure enough you get the psychedelic purple lightshow of death again. Bill keeps hitting the rock with his aura painting spell and the wards just keep blasting away at the rock. Thirty seconds later there is no rock. Bill immediately sends a Curious George down the hallway and it dies from a jet of fire instead of green or purple.

“Excellent. Quickly get another rock. The first two are down, but not out. We need to drain this puppy like a bottle of firewhiskey!”

The next rock also meets purple death, but the one after that survives with only half its mass destroyed. Bill sends a CG all the way to the arch. Bill gives you a big smile and fires off a quick trio of reductor curses at three spots on the wall.

“Harry, do you see any more controller runes? I think that’s all of them.” You shake your head no.

“Why don’t we destroy the charging runes?” You point to the four clusters of runes already beginning to faintly glow as they begin to siphon power from the environment.

“Initially, you can’t. The controller runes typically shield the charging runes. Without the controller they are useless. Also say we find the ‘mother of all that is evil’ in there. We might need to seal it back up. Just create our own controller rune and we are back in business.”

“Why not attack the controller rune directly and be done with it?”

“Do you like big booms? Losing the controller rune while the trap runes still have power will set off a cascade that would at the very least brought this room down on us. The purple lightshow becomes the big purple explosion and Bill and Harry’s excellent adventure ends here dude.” Bill finishes with a mock American accent.

“Bill and Harry’s excellent adventure?”

“Muggle movie title, except it is Bill and Ted’s. Figured you would have heard of it.”

“No, fraid not. I wasn’t a regular guest for movie night at the Dursleys.”

“Catch a movie this weekend. Maybe there is a family friendly thing you can take Karina and her boy to, if you are so inclined. Lets take thirty minutes then check again to see if we got all the controllers. Then you get to grab that notebook and help me diagram this scheme out completely. We need to trace out the trap runes, because I want to learn how to do my own purple lightshow. That’s another fun thing about this job. After you beat someone’s trap, you figure out how to make your own version. Maybe you can find a way to tweak it and make it better. See if I did this, I would create a secondary set of controller runes and disillusion them. I would put a failsafe timer on them and have it count for five minutes. They drop their guard and then BOOM!” Bill finishes with a maniacal look on his face.

“Moody must love you.”

“He once told me I was the second son he always wanted.”

“Moody has kids?” You shiver at the thought.

“One son and two daughters. The son moved to Australia, one of the daughters is a squib who works for Scotland yard. The other daughter was an auror who died during Voldemort’s first rise.”

“Well, I guess you learn something new everyday.”

“That you do. Congratulations on breaking you first scheme, young apprentice. Consider your cursebreaking cherry popped.”

“Bill, you use way too many sexual references. Did anyone ever tell you that?” You quip while reaching for a bottle of water. Today is a good day to be Harry Potter or James Black or whoever you are.

Author’s notes – Hope you like this chapter. It was pure enjoyment to write. I’ve never been straight on the whole animage/animagus thing, so I decided to make a running joke out of it.



Disclaimer – You're still Harry Potter. You still don't own your rights. A lady with the initials JKR does. How's it feel to be someone's property?

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## Chapter 8 – Eating Their Nuts

“Well what do you think?” Bill asks.

“I don't know something is projecting a veil of darkness. We've sent three CG's in and none of them came back from across the threshold of that archway.” Sanchez replies in her rapid-fire voice. You've had bad experiences with veils and arches, so you keep your thoughts to yourself. At least the fast talking slag doesn't seem so eager to try and crack this trap.

You listen to Bill and Maria talk as you continue to sketching and tracing the runes from the previous set of runes you and Bill defeated yesterday. Collins just went outside to apparate back to the camp and Kwan should be here in about ten minutes. One of Bill's 'Golden Rules of Cursebreaking' was to never apparate inside of a site for fear of triggering wards. The funny thing was the 'Golden Rule' changed from day to day. You're beginning to think Bill is just making all this crap up. You have to go back in an hour to check on the roast you have in the oven, although Thundercloud said he would pull it out, if you were late.

Three runes make up the green blast of energy and no less than seven constituted the 'purple lightshow of doom'. Once you get them back to the tent, Bill wants you to compare each of them to THE BOOK. THE BOOK, or Golinard's Field Cursebreaking Manual is the cursebreaker's bible. They have plenty of other tomes, but only one of them is THE BOOK. Bill's copy is full of notes all jotted in the margins. He is pretty protective of it, going so far as to tell you not to even drink or eat around THE BOOK. You suspect that if Granger

ever became a cursebreaker, she would find a way to animate the book so she could sleep with it.

Sanchez won't even let you look at her copy. When you asked, she had made a comment that you would have better luck trying to get her in the sack. You spent the next thirty minutes trying to scrub that disgusting image out of your mind. Seriously, the woman looks like a childhood splinch accident that no one ever got around to fixing! You used to call Aunt Petunia 'Horse Face', but she at least had something resembling a neck. Whoever was beating her with the ugly stick must have broken her nose along with the stick.

The set of runes they are working on are hidden behind this darkness being projected. Whoever designed this set definitely didn't want to repeat their design. Instead of brute force, this layer seems to rely on keeping whatever is behind the darkness hidden.

"It looks like there is some kind of silencing charm up as well. Probably why we don't hear the monkey's scream." Sanchez observes.

"Hey Bill, do you have any of those extendable ears from the dipshit duo?" You ask.

"Good idea! I think I have a couple in my backpack." He rummages around and pulls out one while explaining the purpose to his counterpart.

This time the monkey went in holding the end of the extendable ear. Bill listened from the other end. Ten seconds later he pulled it away from his ear and slowly put it back. He closed his eyes straining to hear something.

"It screamed a bunch and then something got it. I think I hear movement in there. No other sounds just movement. You know what that means?"

Sanchez answered him, "Necro Wards. I hate inferi. Could be some kind of animated construct too, but knowing the history of this region my guess is undead."

You are curious about something. “Bill, why didn’t the monkey come back out?”

Bill tugs on the string. It doesn’t move. “Shit! It’s also got a one-way ward on it. The monkeys couldn’t get back out.

“Too bad the monkeys can’t talk.” Sanchez says. She eyes you and you wonder if she is actually considering asking you to go in, bitch.

You set your sketchpad and the pencils down from your tracing and walk over to Bill. You lean into his ear and whisper. “I could conjure a snake, send it in and hear what it says, but that would mean letting her know about my gift.”

Bill looks thoughtful for a minute and finally says. “Madame Sanchez, I would like to make an addendum to your Non-Disclosure Oath. Do you swear on your professional reputation to not discuss what you are about to see?” Interestingly enough, cursebreakers usually swear on their professional reputation. When questioned, they will respond that they swear that they have never violated their reputation or if they have they usually have to provide the pensieve memory of how it happened. No real penalties, but it seems to be a code of honor among them.

“Si, on this I do swear.” She responded.

“Do it.” Bill says to you.

“Serpensortia!” You cast creating a snake a little over a meter in length. You cast the weak compulsion charm on it and hiss in Parsel. “Go through the blackness. Tell me what is on the other side. I will hear you.” You see Sanchez’s raised eyebrow and a slight nodding of her head.

You pick up the extendable ear as the snake slithers across the threshold. Now that you know the compulsion charm it makes the snake conjuring spell a bit more useful. Previously you had to bargain with any snakes you tried to conjure. By the time you convinced them

what to do the spell had run its course and the snake vanished. You hadn't even bothered trying it since the end of the third year.

"I see dead men. Dead men are- ahhh!" You hear the snake scream and then the shuffling of feet.

"The snake saw dead men – necro wards."

One of Bill's sixth or seventh year defense texts had quite a bit on inferi, real 'Night of the Living Dead' shit. Fire is supposed to work well against them. There's the ever-popular decapitation or blowing a large hole in its head. Though in all honesty, the last two methods work surprising well against most opponents. You look forward to the day you could test that theory against Malfoy. They can be animated in two ways, using potions and rituals to make them rise again, if the necromancer wants a mobile army. Should the necromancer need defenders he or she would use necro wards to animate the dead in a specific area. It's quicker and much easier to use wards, but you are more limited in how you can use them.

You know what's funny? One time when Ronniekins was going off on how Malfoy was going to end up as a necromancer, Hermikins got on this rant about how necromancy was originally an offshoot of divination. It supposedly was an art concerned with contacting dead spirits and that over time has been corrupted and confused with those who practice the vile art of reanimation. To Ron's credit, he let her go on for a solid minute before he looked back at you and said, "So like I was saying, I bet the little ferret ends up as a necromancer."

"Can your snakes tell us how many?" Sanchez asks.

"I don't know. It's worth a try." Who would have guessed she would ever ask you something useful!

Over the next ten minutes you learn one surprising fact – conjured snakes can't count. Maybe, if you had a real snake it could. You should have picked some up prior to heading out. The best answer you got was out of the fourth snake you sent in and that was "many". Many is not a very good number. The three of you ponder this as you wait for the hitwizard.

When Kwan arrives he is briefed that there are an indeterminate number of inferius on the other side of the archway. The little Korean ponders this for a moment before he points at the two cursebreakers. "You two – use fire whip. One whip goes head level and other goes waist level. Cook, you use your tree splitter. You are slow and sloppy with your spells, but they are strong enough. Aim at upper chest. It should blow head off. Unlike trees, inferi move. Do not stop to watch spell, like stupid schoolboy. You cast and then cast again. I don't see you stop casting until no more dead things moving! You stay low with me. Fire whips go over our heads."

You nod at the butcher of the English language. Kwan is referring to your blasting curse. It was about as backhanded of a compliment as you could get. Each day you practiced your offensive spells against a bunch of defenseless trees. You fire cutters and reducers until the tree falls. After it falls you blast away at the stump with 'Tonare', the aforementioned tree splitter. You remember Granger using it to blow up miscellaneous items in the Room of Requirement during DA meetings. In retrospect it was a strange choice on her part. If she wasn't so controlled the shrapnel could have become a missile hazard in the room. She must be more of a precision caster. You on the other hand are swiftly becoming a blow everything in your path to little bits and figure it out later kind of spellcaster, but it makes you feel so much better afterwards!

With Bill and Sanchez set to cast their firewhips, you and Kwan crouch. The idea is that the two fire whips drive the inferius back and you and Kwan dive into the darkness and start blowing things up. Sometimes simplicity is the best course of action.

"You sure your up for this Har, uh James?" Bill says slipping up.

"Yeah, easy plan. Blow them up. Works for me."

"Right. Everyone ready. Maria, start casting – now!"

You watch as the two fire whips disappear into the dark. Kwan nods and both of you cross feeling an icy chill up your spine as you cross the threshold. The room is barely lit and you immediately cast your

blaster at the first shape you can make out. Kwan releases some kind of power wave, which tosses the ones in front of him backwards. You cast again wondering if you can convince him to teach you that one. Staying low you cast your third blaster as you sense Bill stepping in behind you casting a second fire whip, yet another spell you need to acquire. The light generated by the whips allows you to see better. There are about a dozen of them in the ten meter by ten meter room. One of yours is down for good. The second is missing both arms from your less than accurate cursing. You remedy that with another blaster. Potter scores again! The Mexican keeps up with her fire whip, but Bill switches over to using cutters and reductors. Bill's superior aim blows one head off and severs another just as your blaster hits the same. You look for your next target and realize that not making Kwan angry at you should be a higher priority in your life. Together you and Bill got four. Kwan destroyed the other eight with a skill you hope to one day achieve. You're too busy casting to watch, but you hope you'll be able to see it in a pensieve sometime, because it must have been something.

"Clear!" Kwan shouts. Cadavers are everywhere. They had climbed out of niches carved into the walls. Glowing on the ceiling were the series of necro wards responsible for animating them. At the other end of the room is yet another door, but what really catches your eye is on a pedestal sits a large shaped statuette of a dragon. It is apparently has been shaped from gold. The only real disturbing thing about it is that it has three charging runes and a controlling rune on each of its wings. They feed into a single large complex rune on its chest. The rune is currently active and that really worries you.

"Weasley!" Sanchez shouts. "The dragon!"

Bill looks at it and sees it is active. "James, send a snake towards it." As soon as you cast it the Snake starts writhing in agony and hissing at everyone. Kwan doesn't hesitate. He kills it immediately with a cutter.

"Sanchez, disable the one way. We need to get out of here!"

"It will take too long, blow the wall!" Sanchez replies looking at the rune scheme above the portal you came through.

“Right. Kwan, Harry, blow a hole right here. I’ll keep the ceiling from collapsing.” Bill messed up and called you Harry again, but you’ll scold him later provided both of you survive this. Five curses later there is a big enough hole. It’s ladies and hags first as Sanchez dives through. You go next scuffing yourself a bit on the loose stone. Kwan comes through. Bill is trying to back out while keeping his enchantment on the ceiling. It’s not working so well. He’s stuck.

“Bill, go slack and I’ll summon you!” You scream. You wait three seconds and scream “Accio, Bill!” Bill pops out your side. He’s a bit dazed as he stumbles upright. The side of his head is bleeding and he is pretty badly scraped in several places. You hear the ceiling on the other side collapse.

“Harry, summon another snake.” You comply, but with the same results, wondering how much longer the ‘James Black’ masquerade is going to last with all these repeated slip ups. The snake thrashes wildly screaming about pain and agony.

“Whatever it is it is still active. Grab and go. Move it!” You scoop up Bill’s backpack and your sketchpad on the way out. In the next room you see about a twenty snakes thrashing around in the room, but moving forward. There’s a number of lizards in the group as well. The ward seems to be attracting snakes and other reptiles and driving them insane. In this instance your language ability is becoming a burden with all the screams of the snakes. They are hissing and biting at each other, but still moving towards you. A horrifying thought crosses your mind during this cacophony of sound. Dragons are really big reptiles aren’t they?

You reach in your pocket and grab your shrunken broom. Quickly you cancel out your shrinking charm and the Dragonfly returns to its normal size. Kwan and the rest are using cutters, bansishers and flash freezing charms to try and clear them away. Kwan does that wicked looking banisher again and dozens of snakes go flying through the air. You have got to learn that spell!

“Sanchez, climb on. I’ll fly you out first and come back for you two, unless you want to chance an apparition out of here?”

“No, you’re right. No telling what wards were sprung when that one went off. Get her out of the building. Sanchez, when you’re clear of the building apparate back to camp. We’ll hold them here.”

You feel Maria’s weight settle on the broom and her arms encircle you. It’s disgusting, but you don’t really have time for that. “Hang on! Tight clearances!” You kick off and lean forward. The bitch’s wide ass is adding a lot of mass to your flight as you careen off the wall. You entertain the thought of pushing her off as you corner again and smack into the wall again. That’ll leave a bruise! Between the screaming snakes and the wailing Mexican slag directly next to your ear, you realize that you would be better off casting a deafness charm on yourself. Nothing’s bit you yet and those Vipertooth hide boots are proving their worth whenever your feet have to dangle. You burst into the sunlight and kick up your speed. Well at least you know where all the snakes are coming from, the blood vine is being transfigured into snakes! Holy shit! It’s scary as hell, but it is damn impressive! You head for a clearing and pretty much dump her off of the broom. “Get out of here!”

You yank the broom hard over and accelerate towards the opening. The underbrush seems to be alive with reptilian activity. Without Sanchez weighing you down, you are much quicker. Bill and Kwan are holding the mass of critters off. Kwan motions for Bill to hop on. Fortunately Bill doesn’t scream like a girl. In fact coming into the first corner he hits the wall in front of you with a cushioning charm and you bounce hard but keep on flying. The passageway’s are filling with reptiles now – not good. The din is maddening. Bill isn’t a helpless passenger though, he keeps tossing spells left and right. On the long twenty-five meter stretch he trails his wand behind the broom casting one long incendio like a muggle flamethrower scorching snakes and lizards alike. Bill leaps from the broom as you get to the clearing rolls forward stops and instantly vanishes. You feel like such an amateur as you spin around to get Kwan. Bill’s cooking session left the passageways with the aroma of burnt reptile. You briefly wonder if it actually does taste like chicken?

Kwan is almost backed up to the darkness veil by the time you reach him. He is still casting spells at a breakneck pace. He leaps onto your



broom and sags into you. This ride is a bit rougher as the small Korean doesn't seem to be in any shape to cast spells. He almost falls off when you hit the second wall. As you smack into the third wall, you hear a loud roar from outside. You think whatever it is that is doing this just found a dragon.

You clear the entrance and start scanning the sky. There's a dragon alright and a pair of wyverns circling and snapping angrily at each other. You reach the clearing and Kwan falls off. He looks like he has passed out. You point your wand at him and enervate him. He blearily opens his eyes.

"Can you apparate?" You yell to him. He doesn't look like he understands you. No choice, you scoop him up and start towards the camp again. The good news is the dragon has driven off the two wyverns. The bad news is that it has spotted Harry Potter. You fly as fast as the broom will carry you and the semi-comatose hitwizard. You reach the camp with about a one minute lead and the thing is closing fast.

"Bill! There's a dragon right behind me! I'll lead it off. Break camp and leave me a portkey on that rock! Use a water bottle!" You point to the rock where you spent several nights sitting and watching the stars. Thundercloud takes the hitwizard from you. Collins and Sanchez are already breaking down the tent.

"Be careful!" Bill yells as you take off towards the dragon. It is an interesting statement – 'Be Careful'. It's not like you planned to play dragon bait today is it? If you had your firebolt, you could fly circles around that thing. Well maybe not, but then again it's nice to dream. It must be a Vipertooth. It's built smaller than the Horntail. Must be built for speed and agility. That would be your luck wouldn't it? You toss a blasting curse at it from a distance – probably the equivalent of shooting a spitball. Sure enough it impacts ineffectively as you bank hard right and begin to climb. This would have to be a day with not a single cloud in the sky. Hopefully, making it climb will slow it down as you send another blasting curse at it. For some reason, Dean Thomas's stupid movie quotes pop into your head and you hear him say in a fake French accent, "I fart in your general direction!" Stupid

Dean and his obsession with Monty Python, you hope he does end up with Ginny. They deserve each other!

Not that there hasn't already been a run of bad news today, but the dragon is gaining. Open air, apparently, is not your friend today. Better hit the deck and see if you can lose the damn thing there. Gravity helps you accelerate, borrowing from the best seeker you know, you toss a blinding curse back over your shoulder. Viktor would be proud. You wonder what the hell he ever saw in Hermione anyway? Seriously, he's a rich, famous international quidditch star from a school that wouldn't even admit Hermione if she wanted to go there. It's just another of those things that don't make sense. The jungle's canopy is pretty thick here. You had hoped to be able to dive in and lose the dragon there, but you might also break your fool neck! Scissor right! Scissor left! Can't this damn thing go any faster? You've got some maneuverability Potter, use it! A bright spot in the news is that, it had to slow itself during the rapid descent to prevent crashing through the treetops. There's a bit more space between the two of you now. Another blinding curse! This one hit something. It must have got only one of the dragon's eyes though, because it is still coming. Bank left! Nothing! It must be the right eye. Throw a third blinding curse at it and bank right. Yes! That's the blinded eye. You saw it move it's whole head to keep up with your turn. Lay flat out on the broom and skim the treetops; it will be wary of the tree hazard. You know sudden changes in tree height. Like say for instance that big tree you just barely missed – idiot!

How long have you been at this? They should be gone now, shouldn't they? All that is left is the simple task of out maneuvering a dragon and getting back to your portkey. You've got two choices; either land and apparate or out fly it back to camp. Stick with what you know Potter! You can out fly anything on a broom. Hard right! Now pour on the speed! Not drizzle on the speed – pour it on dammit! You should be close enough to summon it soon. Get ready. Now here is a question for you to consider, what happens when a broom rider at max velocity activates a portkey? You might want to cut your speed right as the portkey gets to you? There are three possible outcomes, you live, you live but hurt yourself or Potter flavored dragon kibble. The last two outcomes really don't suit you that well. Campsite is coming up.

“Accio, water bottle!” You barely see the speck flying through the air. Thank goodness for the blue label. Should have had Bill use a more conspicuous object. Brake and catch!

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You hit the ground with hard thump. Well the right side should now have matching bruises for the left side. Fair is fair, after all. The others are waiting for you. Collins is supporting Kwan, who still looks out of it.

“Did you have fun flying?” Bill asks innocent voice. His expression is one of tremendous relief.

“Loads. And here I thought Quidditch was a rough sport? Dragon baiting isn’t my cup of tea.”

“Righteous flying, Cookie.” Bill responds.

“How did you know to evacuate?” You really want to know the answer to that question.

“Golden Rule, if a ward is active and you don’t know what it is or how long it has been active; be scared. If it isn’t doing anything run like hell, because you don’t want to wait around and find out!” You sigh at another of Bill’s ‘Golden Rules’, but know that it saved everyone’s collective behinds today.

“Are we going to go back there?”

“Maybe, I’d love to see the runes that were used to transfigure the blood vine into serpents. Plus, whatever ward was on that statue somehow summoned and agitated snakes and dragons. That said, I think your flying buddy will end up destroying the ruins before it leaves, but our hopes of finding a portkey to the City of the Damned or some kind of magical map that predated the Fidelius charm are slim to none. We’ll move on to the next site, but for now how about we take a three day weekend instead of trying to get set up at the second site only to break camp later that day?” Bill’s suggestion

seems to meet instant approval. Near death experiences will do that! A nice bed is better than the hammocks in the tent. You shrink your broom and start dabbing bruising cream from a small container Sanchez just tossed you.

"You fly like you are loco. I hurt all over, but that is a good thing." She says with a smile. Damn! She needs some serious dental work too.

"Anytime – actually, not anytime. Let's save it for the real emergencies." You respond with a chuckle.

With that the group breaks up to meet Monday morning. As you make your way into the magical area on the outskirts of Rio, Kwan, Collins and Sanchez head for the portkey area to Sao Paulo, where they can catch their International portkeys. You, Bill and Thundercloud head to the Gringott's branch to get the five hundred galleons for your ritual. Bill was so disappointed when he didn't get any reaction out of Thundercloud's totem, but expressed an interest in learning to become one to the Native American.

"Be certain to select simple things to prepare next week. The purifying potions often cause a person to have hallucinations. One of their main ingredients is peyote. I will assist in the cooking, when young James is not, as one might say, all there." The animagus, or is it animage, says like you should know what in the name of all that's magical peyote is.

With that Thundercloud says his goodbyes and takes his leave. Bill looks at you. "Let's go check into the hotel. You up for a short apparition? Good! Concentrate on the alley behind the hotel. Whenever you're ready Harry."

You squeeze yourself into nothingness and reappear on the other side intact. Bill appears a second later. "Hey, you're still in one piece. Good show!" You flip him a quick one finger salute in reply. He smacks the back of your head in a brotherly manner as the two of you head around to the front of the hotel.

The registration desk is nice and accommodating, but only has one of the two rooms available. It doesn't really matter to you. You volunteer

to take the couch. If all else fails, you can set up the tent and sleep in the hammock inside. You just really want to get in a hot bath and soak. Is that too much to ask? All the tent has is a shower. These hotel rooms have a nifty Jacuzzi style tub, with all those relaxing jets of water.

Much later you are sitting on the couch reading Luna's latest entry, while Bill has his maps of the ruin sites spread out on the table. A nice hour long soak and another liberal application of anti-bruising cream has you looking and feeling like your desperate broom ride was actually one of ickle Ronniekin's daydreams.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your prompt reply. It's good to see you take my threats seriously! I trust there will be no further reminders required. It's raining today, so I am catching up on my ancient runes work and COMC assignment. I usually just draw a picture of a Snorkack or something for Hagrid. He doesn't ask questions. I almost wish he would. No snorkack hunting for us today! How are your 'Independent Studies' going? If you really want your summer assignments, I would be more than happy to contact someone and get them for you. Ha Ha!

So the great Harry Potter is a pretty decent cook on top of everything else. Best not let that get out, the fangirls would be relentless and some of the fangirl's mums might be after you too! My price for not sending this juicy tidbit off to Teen Witch Weekly is one hot simmering apple pie. I know blackmail is so very beneath me, but it is a flaw I am learning to live with.

Glad to hear that you can apparate now! I confess to being a bit curious about why Dumbledore never gave you any special training? You've done very well on your own, but a little help should have been the order of the day. I've already said it, but I'll say it again. Thank you for everything you taught in the DA last year. Keep on learning as much as you can. If there is no DA if and when you come back, then you can just be my private defense tutor. I'll even consider letting you off the hook for the apple pie.

That night vision charm you diagramed looks quite useful. Sadly, I have to wait until September to try it, but it is tops on my priority list. Are you still doing the blond look? I can tell you from personal experience that blondes are more fun!

Well, Daddy is calling. I must be going. Do brush up on your baking before you return.

Ever shining down on you,

Luna

P.S – Looney says she deserves some Cherries Jubilee for her silence. Sorry, I'm just the messenger.

You wipe off the grin on your face. She apparently has a weakness for baked desserts. That might be useful someday. You've never made cherries jubilee before. Your pies aren't bad. Not as good as Ma Weasel, but still rather tasty. The unnerving thing is that you get the impression that she is actually flirting with you. You don't have enough experience to be sure and quite honestly, you are just getting to know the real her. If you ask Bill for advice, he'll probably tell you to sleep with her. He seems like he is already going into Fleur withdrawal or something.

Dear Luna,

Isn't it a little early to be resorting to blackmail? I'll consider it. As for Looney's request, I don't know if my cooking cherries jubilee with open flames is necessarily a good idea, but we'll see what happens. In an earlier entry, you recommended that I go find some trouble. Well let me tell you about my day ...

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You put down the pen about thirty minutes later wondering whether you should have told Luna about all the things that happened to you today. You weren't really bragging. In fact you didn't really even elaborate on your dragon chase and the sheer terror you were experiencing at the time. Something is just lacking in the sentence – 'I

had to distract the dragon and lead it away from camp, before I could circle back around and summon my portkey.' Oh well, she has an active imagination. She should be able to fill in the blanks. Time for some well deserved rest.

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The morning comes much quicker than you had hoped. Bill is still sleeping. He was still up when you turned in last night. He seemed a little too on edge last night. He was taking the snafu yesterday badly. He complained that he is a meticulous planner and hates when everything goes to hell in an extra large, magically expanded handbasket. Your response had you ducking a trio of books he chucked at you.

"Honestly Bill, who does like it when things go to shit?" You mimic Hermione pretty well while ducking the books.

Bill told you that you are pretty much on your own this weekend. He has to grease a few government palms to get the necessary 'exploration permits' to visit the second site. He says it is the absolute worst part of being a cursebreaker. Normally, Gringott's handles the procurement of these permits, but your team isn't sponsored by the Goblin Bank. You pick up one of the books he had casually chucked at you. It's the mission journal to report back to the Order. You decide to open it and see some news from the home front.

Dear Bill,

I do hope everything is well and that you are taking all the necessary precautions when exploring those awful places. I know you are a grown man, but it is still a mother's prerogative to be worried. I will pass along your latest reports at the next Order meeting.

To answer your earlier question, we haven't located Harry just yet. He has apparently gone into hiding among the muggles. Right now any owls we send just come back. His own owl refuses to even leave with a letter for him. I am very worried about him, but there are no reports that he has fallen into you-know-who's clutches. It was very foolish of him to run off like that! Merlin knows what trouble he could get into!

He needs to be here where he can be minded properly. Rest assured, that I will keep him under lock and key. Hermione and Ginny are beside themselves with worry! I hope wherever he is, he knows what he is putting those poor girls through.

I hope you are in regular contact with Fleur, such a nice young lady. I am beginning to wonder if she might be the one you have been looking for. Everyone else sends their love.

Please be safe,

Your loving Mum.

You set the book down with a renewed sense of disgust. 'Minded properly'! More like drugged and controlled. You've got her lock and key right here! The only foolish thing you have done recently is put your trust in any Weasley not named Bill. As for the two manipulative bitches, they are just worried that you know them for what they really are – good for nothing useless slags!

Nothing works quite like a bit of righteous anger to get the blood pumping in the morning. You set the books back on the table and slip into the shower. The bruises are pretty much gone. Being magical does have its positives doesn't it? Quickly, you dress in some shorts and a shirt. Sleepyhead is just rising when you come out dressed already.

"Morning Bill, rough night?"

"Yeah, tossed and turned for awhile. Tried to figure out where it went wrong."

"Any conclusions?"

"The Armageddon ward was probably set to trigger on heat. Our fire whips probably set it off. Everyone knows that you use fire against inferi. The bastard who designed it probably is laughing there arse off at us in the afterlife – crafty bugger! Sorry, I just hate losing."



“Buck up, me hearty.” You say in your best pirate voice. “We can always go back and dig for buried treasure. You didn’t lose. You just have to postpone your victory dance for a while.”

“Sage like advice, from someone so young. You realize you’ll be doing a lot of the digging, if it comes to that?”

“Digging, cooking, cleaning it’s nothing new. I am drawing the line at washing everyone’s grundies though. Hell will freeze over, thaw, and freeze over again before I touch Sanchez’s unmentionables!”

“Gah! Harry, I didn’t need that image this morning!”

“Hey, that reminds me. You slipped up several times yesterday and called me Harry instead of James. I don’t know how much longer we can keep this charade up.”

“Damn! You’re right. I can probably get another Non Disclosure Oath out of Maria and Thundercloud. The hitwizards won’t be a problem. Their obsession with reputation is greater than cursebreakers and their biggest rule is to not talk about your previous clients without permission. Let me grab a shower and we’ll go get something for breakfast. Bet you’re glad you don’t have to do any cooking today.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Someone is going to be waiting on me today.”

“Would that someone’s name be Karina?” Bill asks teasing.

“Perhaps. I figured I would pick up some pretty looking vegetation from that shop and pop over to see her today. If she isn’t available, I’ll just hang around the beach and play tourist and whatnot. Later on, I was going to start carving a better set of intruder wards and personal recognition wards. I might need to pick up some more base material to carve. Do you need me to pick up anything else, other than next week’s groceries?”

“Pick me up a cheap broom. I’ll keep it shrunk in my pocket like you. I don’t want to be caught with my pants down like that ever again. Nothing fancy, just something that will fly. I don’t intend on trying to rival either you or Charlie in the sky. If you want a challenge, try

adding runes that will determine temperature and precipitation to your intruder and personal recognition wards. Always nice to know what the weather is like before you step outside.” He’s got an evil grin on his face, like he is setting you up for failure. You’ll see about that. Harry Potter doesn’t back down. Well okay, Harry Potter does run away from dragons, but for the most part Harry Potter doesn’t back down! Not really a great battlecry – you need to work on that.

“Right. No problem. Well actually small problem, I need some galleons.”

“Money pouch is on the nightstand. Take what you need. It’s yours after all.” Bill said as he headed off to the shower.

While you waited for slowpoke to get ready, you finished another chapter in the Ancient Runes manual. It’s a bit boring, but the practical side is interesting enough. You have your doubts that anything in the Hogwart’s curriculum would have helped bust that Necro Ward. Baby steps, Harry! Learn the simple stuff from a book and the real deal from Bill. Not too many ward schemes out there use ‘friendship and trust’ in their mix, but here in front of you is six pages in a book about various runes to represent the two. You remember Hermione fretting about mistranslating ‘partnership and defense’ on her OWLs. Wonder if she realizes the real difference between mistranslating runes? Perhaps a thousand snakes slithering down a corridor towards you? No way, it must be the difference between Outstanding and Exceeds Expectations! You’ve often wondered exactly whose expectations these ruddy exams were based on? For instance with Crabbe and Goyle forming whole sentences is ‘Exceeding Expectations’. There is a good deal of ambiguity in the magical world isn’t there?

You are being a bit harsh now aren’t you? Friendship, trust and happiness runes supposedly form the basis for embedding a cheering charm into a runic scheme. To do so, you need to carve the three runes and cast the linking spell to create the runic scheme. After that you cast the charm on each of the runes in specified sequence, link it to your controlling and charging runes and voila a weak field that makes everyone feel a little better. Engrave it into fountains, park benches and what not. Then sit back and watch the happy little

tourists spend their money. You bet Las Vegas does it too! Why else would anyone go to an effing desert? Karina mentioned that the family that is trying to ruin her maintains runes around the city to make people enjoy their stay in this area. You'll have to keep an eye out for the runes as you go about town.

An hour later, you are done with your breakfast. You pick up an assortment of flowers that your 'guy instincts' tell you are acceptable. From their, the two of you apparate to the magical only beach and head into the village. Bill heads off to bribe some low-level government official – err acquire exploration permits and you head off in the direction of the Machado hovel. You wonder how James Black will be received.

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Author's notes – Full discussion on Darklordpotter as always. A very special thanks to the lovely Vanna for inspiring the whole origin of Necromancy in a thread there! She played Hermione and your author played Ron in the scene you see in this chapter. She's right of course, but with D&D and various RPGs, necromancy has become another term for the practice of reanimation. Next chapter you'll find out what passes for fun in Magical Brazil – Dodgespell!

Disclaimer – You're still Harry Potter and someone else still owns your rights. However, the two knut hack writing this story came up with the semi-original idea of dodgespell based off of good old fashioned dodgeball. If others want to use it in their stories visit my profile for the rules of the game.

Acknowledgements – Welcome to the alpha prereaders, CootiePatootie! I look forward to your insight and ideas. All the rest of the gang (IP82, ChuckDaTruck, FairyQilan, Sirius/Killginny009 and Nukular Winter) did their usual smashing job making me look more talented than I actually am. Finally, I want to give a big thank you to Nonjon for the encouragement and assistance with this chapter.

## Chapter 9 – Saving Their Raisins for Sunday

You're nervous. To say you aren't very good with the opposite sex is an understatement. Your track record looks about as good as Chudley's chances at the title. Still you are a foolishly brave idiot and armed with your new battlecry of 'Harry Potter doesn't back down from anything, except maybe Dragons', you knock on the door of Karina Machado's ramshackle hovel. You reapply the translation charm and wonder why in the hell you are here again.

The door opens up and instead of Karina's pretty face you look down at the small form of Francisco Machado. He gets a big smile on his face when he see's you.

"Hi Chico. Is your mum in?"

"She's out back in the yard. Wanna see my toys again?"

"Maybe later. I want to say hello to your mum first." Hopefully, he won't ask any more questions.

"Are you going to be my new daddy?"

It takes you a full minute to wipe that stunned look off your face. It would be much easier if the ground would just open up and swallow you whole. You realize that Luna must approach her 'Looney' persona by using the perspective of a five year old.

“Err, argh, I uh?” You should really just run for it. Apparating would be a really good idea now wouldn’t it? Screw this! Harry Potter also runs away from five year old boys who ask him if he is going to be their new daddy! The back door opens and Karina walks in. Apparate before she sees you idiot! Destination – anywhere but here! Too late! She’s looking at you now.

“Oh, hello James.” Karina says with a small smile setting the small bucket full of lawn care tools on the table. She looks good, even when she’s dirty. She’s walking towards you. You are so out of your league! Her hair is pulled up in a bun. Give her some teacher’s robes, turn the lights down and you could live out one of your fantasies involving Professor Sinistra and a steamy night in the old Astronomy Tower. ‘Would you help me adjust my telescope professor?’

“Hi. How are you doing?” Let’s just ignore Chico for the moment, shall we?

“Trying to make sure the weeds won’t completely take over my yard. I believe it to be a losing battle. How was your week exploring the countryside?”

“It was informative. I learned some interesting things.” Very nonchalant Potter, best leave out the terrifying bits for now.

“That’s nice. For me?” She eyes the bundled vegetation in your hands. You hand them over with a dumb look on your face. She sniffs them appreciatively. “Normal?”

“Huh?”

“No enchantments on the flowers?”

“Oh, no. I got them from a stand across from the muggle hotel Bill and I are staying at?”

“Muggle? What is muggle?”

“Oh, it must be an European term. Muggle means non-magical people.”

“We just call them Normal or Norms. Muggle sounds kind of mean.” She’s got a point, when she says it like that.

“I never thought of it that way, but you’re right. So if they are normal, what are we?” You reply.

“Magical people are gifted. We are blessed with a talent above the norm. These are very nice. Thank you.” She says putting the flowers in a vase. “Have you eaten yet?”

“I caught breakfast at the hotel. What are you two up to today?”

“After I clean up, Chico and I were going down to the beach. There is a dodgespell tournament starting tomorrow and Chico wants to go see it, so they’ll be setting up for it today and there might be a few pickup games going on.”

“Dodgespell?”

“Don’t they play it in England?”

“No. It’s pretty much quidditch or nothing there. What’s dogdespell like?”

“Dodgespell is a great game. It’s easier to show you how it is played rather than describe it to you. You’re welcome to come along.” She says with a teasing smile that starts your blood flowing.

“Sounds fun. Do you play?” You say trying to sound like anything other than a babbling schoolboy. It’s working isn’t it? Of course it is, because you are so cool aren’t you?

“Some. I haven’t played since last year, but I still have my glove around here somewhere.” She says flicking her wand and casting a location spell. A greenish hue appears around one of the boxes. Karina had mentioned that one family of spells she was proficient with is location charms. Her duties as a governess must have given her a

good deal of practice with those kind of charms. From the box, she pulled out a worn looking animal hide glove. She puts it on her hand and casts 'absorbere stupefy'

"Okay, James cast a stunner at me."

"Pardon?"

"It's okay. The glove has an absorption shield on it. If you are worried, just aim to my left side."

"Okay. Stupefy." You say it without any real conviction and the result is pretty weak. Karina sticks her gloved hand out and catches the red light with her hand. The bluish glow of the shield faded, but did not go away completely.

"That is a catch and one point for my team. Now I have possession of the spell, I could cast my own against you or anyone on your team. You could either dodge my spell or catch it. If I hit you, you're out of the game and my team gets ten points. Each team has five players. Last team with any players left usually wins. If you are playing a friendly game, then they use stunners or some other noticeable jinx. For the tournaments, they will erect reflective dueling shields and the players will use pello hostis. Trust me, the crowd always loves it when someone gets banished into the wards and bounces back out onto the sand. It hurts a little, but mostly your pride."

"So the spells bounce back into play off the wards?" Karina considers the question like she is remembering something and gets a sly grin on her face.

"You bet! That's the best part! It makes the game more interesting when you have to watch out for the rebound of the spell. If you have some good teammates, you can throw your banisher into the wards and score a hit while one of your teammates distracts your opponent. The absolute crowd pleaser is when someone gets double banished."

"Sounds pretty fun." You could use some fun.

“Well we could pick you up a glove in the market and you could give it a try if you want? You have to keep an eye on your shield glove and know when to reapply it. I could take one or two more of your stunners, but I think that you weren’t really trying. There are two spells in play. If your side has possession of the spells, it’s a good idea for everyone to recast their shields, but if you don’t cast your attack spell in ten seconds your side loses a point. You’ll pickup more by watching people play than listening to me tell you about it.”

You remember reading a bit about the absorbing shield from your dueling manual. Professional duelists use it among other shields to dazzle the crowd. The downside is you have to know what spell they are throwing at you and it has a limited area of roughly fifteen by fifteen centimeters rather than the blanket protego that you spent most of last year trying to drill into the minds of your fellow DA members with varying degrees of success. For some reason, Lavender and Parvati’s shields were virtually impenetrable around their face and chest, but pretty much tissue paper anywhere else. You do have to admit that there is something wicked cool about catching someone’s spell out of the air.

You earn some brownie points with Karina by entertaining Chico, while she finishes cleaning up both the room and herself with a quick shower. Chico seems to have forgotten his earlier question, which is just as well because you aren’t certain if you know a spell to conjure a ten-foot pole that you aren’t going to touch that question with. When she comes back out her hair is down and she has a much ‘younger’ look. You are pretty sure she doesn’t want to emphasize you age difference. You’ve never really had facial hair. Too bad you can’t grow any. Oh well, you would just have to charm it blond too, if you had any.

“Chico, put your toys away in your room and then get ready to go. Don’t forget to go to the bathroom before we leave and I will check your hands to make sure you washed them.” She uses her ‘mother’ voice.

“Yes mama.” Poor kid. Sounds like someone just killed his dog or something. If good old Petunia had ever talked to you like that, you’d have actually been happy considering the abuse she heaped on you.



The mental list in your mind moves Petunia Dursley up a slot for next available ass whipping. Fred and George move down a slot.

When Chico goes into his room, Karina pulls you into an embrace. You get a nice taste of lips and more than a little tongue. “It is good to see you again, James. Goddess knows, I shouldn’t be doing this but I don’t think anything I do is going to lower people’s opinion of me further.”

Having spent much of the previous two years of your life being slandered, you can emphasize with the feel of her arse. Oops! You can emphasize with her position. She buries her face in your neck and is sucking on it like a starving vampire. After a second, she stops.

“You smell like medicinal creams,” she says curiously.

“Bumped into some solid objects out in the jungle.” You casually respond sliding your hands on the smooth skin on her back.

“Poor baby. Sounds like you need some tender loving care.” She licks her lips and bats her baby blues at you. The rooms cooling charms seem to be failing again.

“Uh huh.” So much for calm, cool and collected Harry – err James Black. Twenty seconds of snogging and a really suggestive look reduces your ability to form whole sentences to Crabbian levels. Crabbian fits better than Goylian doesn’t it? You wonder what kind of care you would get if you were to mention Kwan’s gentle instructional technique.

She laughs evilly and lets you go with a saucy wink and heads off to collect Chico. You have officially accepted your new title of ‘Boy Toy’. It’s not so bad is it? At the moment, it seems to have a very definite backside – you mean upside.

Karina returns with Chico and the two of you start off towards the marketplace. On the way you ask why more people don’t play quidditch here. Karina explains that only the wealthy can afford to buy competitive racing brooms that could be destroyed by a well-hit bludger. It is a sport of the wealthy here and still has a large following.

At her school they had two different leagues – standard and unlimited. The people in the standard league played on the same type of broom, in her year it was the blazing fast Cleansweep Model 4. You consider that most of the spoiled brats in England bitch if they have to ride a pokey old Cleansweep 7. Karina went on to talk about her second year where she played keeper in the standard league. You decide not to mention that you own a Firebolt.

In the same shop where you brought the Dragonfly you pickup a shield glove, along with a small bottle of oil. She tells you that the glove will be a bit stiff until you loosen it up. It costs a galleon less than your wand did at Ollivander's. The material is imported Bunyip hide from Austrailia. Has a nice feel on it. You notice a cheering runic scheme as you step towards the register. Apparently, you should be happily spending your money here. On an impulse or is it the hidden runes making you want to spend more money, you buy Chico a small toy snitch he was eyeing and enjoy the resulting look of joy on the boy's face. Karina smiles at first and then frowns a bit. Did you make a mistake?

As you walk out of the shop, she whispers, "James, please do not go buying Chico things without asking me first."

"I'm sorry. I – uh didn't think you would mind." You say sheepishly. Maybe you aren't cut out for professional 'Boy Toy'?

"It's okay. Renaldo would spoil him with presents rather than spend time with him. I do not want him to come to expect the same of you." She eases up on the withering gaze. You walk in silence down to the dunes of the beach. Sure enough there are two areas roughly the size of a tennis court marked off and a few wizards erecting set of bleachers magically assembling them. One court has people actually playing and the other court has a few people milling about on it. Altogether about thirty-five people were down there. At the end of each side is a small platform with a person standing on it.

You stop to admire the people playing. The team closest to you is down to two and the other team has four players remaining. The red jets indicate stunners, since there are no dueling wards up. A rather attractive girl dives under a stunner and gracefully reapplies her

absorbing shield and takes aim at one of her opponents. She just misses him, but takes a stunner from one of the opposing players. One of the two refs calling the game levitates her body off the court while play continues. The final remaining player lasts two minutes more before he too is stunned. The other team is disciplined. They kept their stance slightly sideways and made it difficult to tell who had the weakest looking shield. He saw a couple of the players on the victorious team reapply their shields, while their opponents were in the middle of casting at their teammates. They were telegraphing their targets. Also of note is that each team had a member up on the raised platforms. Every time their team made a catch, the person on the platform could fire a spell back at the other team. It looked like a tripping hex. That must be the harasser that Karina mentioned earlier.

“We got next.” A man in his early twenties says as the next group of five headed onto the court to face the victors. He seems a bit territorial. You and Karina ignore him. Karina hands Chico several sickles and sends him skipping towards the ice cream vendor.

The next game lasts about fifteen minutes, with the same side being victorious. While watching Mr. ‘We got next’ and his team take the court a man roughly Karina’s age comes up to her.

“Karina, it is good to see you down here. I saw Chico running to the Ice Cream stand and thought I would come over and say hi.”

Karina smiles at him. “Hello, Paulo. Paulo, this is my friend James Black. James, this is Paulo Vangelder. James is visiting from England.” You sense the man sizing you up. He has a professional look to him. His last name sounds Germanic, but Bill had mentioned that the area saw a large amount of European immigration throughout its history.

“What brings you to our country, Mr. Black?”

“Tourism. A chance to see another part of the world.” That and trying to find a piece of El Dorko Lordo’s sheep shagging soul – idiot! You say conversationally. Bill made it clear that under no circumstances should you be talking about cursebreaking in front of the locals.

Seems people get a bit upset when foreigners come in and run roughshod over their heritage.

“Do you play?”

“I thought I would give it a try. I normally play quidditch and hadn’t heard of this game until Karina told me about it.”

“What position?”

“Seeker most of the time. I’m an okay chaser and horrible at beating or keeping.”

“I need two more to make five, are you and James interested Karina?”

“Are you sure you want to be seen playing with me, Paulo? You have a reputation.”

“Karina, Nina is a second or third cousin. She and I do not get along. I think I am related to the Colastos family, but it is so distant that I would have to consult the family scrolls to figure out the connection. I don’t really have enough family connections to rise much higher than I am now in the Policia de Magia. I simply want to play a game with a friend I haven’t seen in months.” He says as non-threatening as possible. You note that the Policia de Magia, or PdM is local law enforcement. Best redouble those efforts at not arousing suspicion.

“I am sorry. I’ve been very bitter lately.” Karina says apologetically. “James and I would love to play on your team.”

“Good, because we have the winners of the this game.” He says.

“Mama, you are really going to play?” Chico looks up, his face once again covered in chocolate ice cream. He looks very excited at the prospect of watching his mother play.

“Yes. You need to behave while Mr. Black and I are out on the court.”

“Yes, Mama.”

While the two teams battled each other, you practice casting the absorbere shield on the glove. Karina demonstrates by showing you the wand motion, two quick swishes with the wand and tap the palm of the glove. It takes you two times to get it right. Karina's glove has the same bluish hue it had earlier. Your glove is glowing fairly brightly, bright enough to attract Paulo's attention as he walks up with a younger man and a young woman.

"That is a strong shield you have, James. This is Reese my brother and his girlfriend, Shelia Lopez." Reese is looking uncertainly at Karina and also at your gloved hand. Apparently, he has shield envy. Sheila is, well to be blunt checking you out. If you had to guess, she's maybe nineteen. She's no threat to Karina in the looks department, but still a pleasant view all the same.

"Thanks. Nice to meet you two." You say tying a bandana around your head. No sense in letting anyone see the scar on your head in case the makeup Fleur gave you gets wiped away.

"How many stunners can it take?" You shake your head. "Well, stand over there and let's find out." Great. This guy is professional law enforcement and now he wants to stun you for fun. Then again Kwan was torturing you, so don't complain too much.

"Okay. Here it comes. Stupefy!" Paulo throws a bright red stunner at you. He's got a bit of juice behind his spells doesn't he?

You step to the side and block the spell with your glowing glove. The bright blue dims a bit, but is still there. Paulo throws a second one. You catch it and the glow fades down to a similar shade of Karina's when she first applies the spell. The third one all but eliminates your shield.

"Okay. This one will probably get through, but try to catch it anyway. Stupefy!" You reach out with your barely glowing glove. The spell hits and the next thing you know, Karina is waking you up, while you are spitting sand out of your mouth. Paulo is smiling at you. "That's a good shield to be able to take three of my stunners. Lets see how strong your stunner is, Englishman." Paulo says with a bit of a

challenge to his voice. He applies his shield to his hand. It's glowing a bit brighter than yours, but then again you just learned this spell five effing minutes ago. On the other hand you know stunning spells really, really well. That brings a 'kick Malfoy in the nuts' sized grin to your face.

"Stupefy!" You say picturing Kwan's smug little face. You are rewarded with an industrial strength jet of red light speeding towards the surprised looking Paulo Vangelder. He catches it with practiced ease, but looks appreciatively at the faded glow on his shield glove. Reese now has wand envy as well. His girlfriend is eyeing you again. You even hear a couple of people in the first set of assembled stands saying something about it.

"Wow, very nice stunner! I could take one more of those before reshielding. Karina, are you sure you didn't bring a ringer?" Karina laughs and smacks Paulo on the shoulder. No need for you to be jealous of him is there? "Okay James, Reese and I will be the catchers. You two ladies are evaders. James, that means that we actively try to catch the spells, because our shields are strong. Some teams have a code where they call out their targets. We don't have any time for fancy crap like that. When you get possession just pick out someone and unload on them, you might just blow through some people's regular shields. First person knocked out is the harasser. Trip whoever we are focusing on. Everyone, keep an eye on your shield and charge it before it goes away. Got it?"

"Sure, catch first, dodge second and stun the living magic out of anyone on the other team." If traitor Ron was here, he would no doubt want to argue about tactics, positioning on the court, windspeed, why the girls should be checking him out instead and any other stupid thing he could think of. You on the other hand, think it is straightforward and brilliant.

The other game finishes and the team with Mr. 'We got next' is beaten, however the winners opt for a rest and let them stay on the court. You suppose winning four consecutive games could start to wear on you. So you take the court. Reese takes the middle position. Sheila is on his right and you are on her right. Karina is on the far left. Everyone charges their shield as the referees ask each side to

identify their captain. Apparently, the captain is worth fifteen points instead of if he or she is eliminated. The captain of each side also starts the game with possession of a spell. As soon as, the ref blows the whistle Paulo and 'We got next' both cast their stunners. Karina catches the spell aimed at her, as does the other teams captain. As soon as she casts she immediately dives out of the way of the return fire. They can see her shield is already down. She casts another weak stunner from the ground as she stands up, since possession goes to the person that was the target of the spell. As she tried to recast her shield, a third stunner came right at her. Paulo jumped in front of it and caught it. He immediately sent one of his more powerful ones back at a female on the opposing side who was a bit too slow and dropped faster than Dudley's fork into food. The scorekeeper floated her off the court where a wizard revived her. The revived girl climbs up on the platform. You have to start watching for trip jinxes now. The score stands at twelve to three. Finally, some one throws one your direction. You catch it and pick out their captain. It doesn't pay to rub Harry Potter the wrong way.

"Stupefy!" He dives underneath your powerful stunner, but you hear the cheers of the crowd. You missed the cheering crowds. Umbridge takes a giant leap forward on the must kick arse list.

The game goes on for another fast paced minute before Sheila gets knocked out, evening the sides. You catch another relatively weak stunner and send your return fire right back at the person who tried to stun you. The kid tries to catch it, but it plows right through his absorbere and he drops to the ground. You quickly reapply your own shield.

"Cast again James! You get possession back if you knock someone out." Paulo says. You get the stunner off before the ten second time limit is up, but your target dodges. Surprisingly enough, Paulo goes down next when both spells were in the possession of the other team. He caught one, but the other one hit his leg. The ref calls out "Possession!" while looking at your side. Reese points at you. "Take it Black." Apparently, you side gets possession of the spell Paulo caught. The girl on the other side casts at Reese and you cast at her. She dives out of the way, but Reese catches her with his return fire. It's you, Karina, and Reese against the other teams captain and one

more guy. Sheila is shooting off her trip jinx every time your side catches one. The advantage is shifting your way.

“Good shot,” you say to Reese, who nods back to you. Karina goes down next, but you get the other team captain’s arm as he tried to evade you. Ha! Ha! Sucker! With the odds at two on one, you and Reese make short work of the last opponent. Reese ends up taking him down after Sheila hits him with her trip jinx, but you don’t care. You congratulate Reese on his play as your three teammates come back on the court.

The next game doesn’t go as well for you. You make a few catches, but many are dodging your spells now. You get knocked out because Sheila got in your way and you couldn’t get around her. You come to on the sidelines and climb up on the platform. It’s an interesting perspective to watch the game as you try to pickup more of the games intricacies and trip the opposition up. Karina is quick and nimble, but her spells are so weak! Maybe you could convince her to let you get her a wand that was a better fit. It’s a shame that your side isn’t more coordinated. You have to guess where your remaining players are going to cast their spells and aim at them. Sheila is pretty good, when she isn’t blocking your way and getting you stunned. You’ve managed to hit a couple of times with your tripper, but in each case it was the wrong target. Reese goes down, but Paulo and Karina are working well together. They manage to get the other team down to one. Unfortunately, Karina takes a hit from a stunner that got through her papier-mache shield. Now it is one on one. Paulo and the other player duel each other very well each are very impressive, but Paulo seems to have the edge. You keep casting your tripping hex as the crowd cheers the two remaining players on.

Paulo manages to beat down his last opponent and your team wins the match. He comes over to get some water as you are descending from your perch. “Do you guys want to go again? It looks like that other team wants a shot at us.” He’s got an infectious grin on his face. “Need to work on your tripping a bit there Englishman.” You shrug wondering if you should flip him off on principal. You elect not to.

Sheila is waiting for you by the cooler Paulo brought with him. “Sorry about earlier. Drink?” She says striking up a conversation and



offering a water bottle. You are glad you reapplied the translation charm. For the most part Karina speaks to you in English. No one else does though. Then again, it's their country isn't it?

"It happens. No problem. Thanks for the water," you say as you open the bottle and start drinking. You hadn't really noticed the heat until now. The two of you walk back out onto the court and take your positions waiting for the referees to set up for the next match.

"Hey, you're really good for a first timer. Paulo might try and get you on the team for the tournament, if your banisher is anything like your stunner."

"Sounds good to me. How many slots does he have open?"

"One and the alternate. How do you get your stunner so powerful?"

"Go through the wand motions, slowly. Let me see your form." you say slipping into DA instructor mode.

She demonstrates her technique. It's off a bit, reminding you of the same problem Terry Boot always has, the spellcasting one – not the creepy twitching eye. Damn Terry, see a specialist or something! "Keep your wrist loose right at the end. You are too rigid. Try that and see if it helps." Reese is shooting you dirty looks from the court now. Seems he is a bit territorial too. Guess he doesn't like seeing you holding her wand hand.

"What the hell do you think you are doing with my girlfriend, Black?"

"Showing her what is wrong with her spellcasting technique. What does it look like?" You fire right back. Sheila's nice, but she isn't worth fighting over.

"Like you know what you are talking about. I saw you falling all over her out there!"

Sheila decides to stick up for you. "Reese, you're being an idiot. I tripped him and he was getting stunned at the time. Quit trying to be all macho." It's nice to see him get verbally bitch-slapped. You do

come to a realization as Reese scuffs his feet in the sand while muttering under his breath. You, Harry James Potter are a bit of a sexist. You tend to let females get away with more annoying behavior than males. In arguments with your traitorous ex-best friends, you would always let Hermione push it further than Ron. You are also more apt to jump down Ron's throat than Hermy's. Merlin, she hates being called that. Note to self. Call Hermione 'Hermy Funbags' from now on. You could convince yourself that it is the truth, but say Malfoy and Parkinson insult you at the same time. What do you do? Ignore Pansy and decide whether or not to curse Draco.

The next question is do you want to do anything about your sexist mindset? The answer is no not right now – maybe later. You look over at Karina as Chico is bouncing around her like a niffler in Gringotts lobby.

The next match should be interesting. Sheila looks like she wants to try your technique out. Reese is probably determined to show you up. Your opponents for this match are the first group that was wiping the floor with the competition. They have very relaxed stances, but are already shielding their gloves. The referee blows the whistle and the spells are in play. A minute into it and Sheila gains possession. Her stunner comes off a bit stronger than it looked previously. She flashes you a smile. In fairness, you keep your wrist loose. Nowhere in any manual does it say loosen your wrist for the stunner, but one thing you learned was that magic is more about confidence than as Snivellus says 'foolish wand waving'. It's sort of the magical equivalent of the placebo effect. You're magically stronger than her. Tell her this is right and what she is doing is wrong. If she buys your line of crap, she is now more confident that you solved her problem and her spells come off better. Honestly, Kwan would have a field day with these people!

You knock a person out with your well-rested stunner. Paulo and Karina go out pretty quickly. Paulo was pretty worn out from the last match. He happily climbs onto the harasser perch. They are focusing on removing Sheila now. You've made a few more catches, but they are wary of you. Reapplying your shield, you dive into the path of a stunner that Sheila barely eludes stumbling from a tripping hex. You catch it and whip a stunner back like bloody Lucius Malfoy is standing

there. Your tactic of using your teammate to hide your spell casting works as you catch another one in the gut. Paulo whoops in support. Too bad the other one got the stumbling Shiela. It's just you and Reese against three of them. Oops it's just you now as Reese is out. Three on one is not very good odds. They shout coded strategies at each other. The first stunner is dead at you and the second one is low and to your right. You dodge the first and catch the second. You send your return stunners back quickly, almost getting one, but their captain reaches over and shields your target catching the second stunner. Damn!

"Go James!" You hear Karina and Chico shouting. A tripping hex catches you and you stumble into the sand. You catch one of the stunners aimed at you and roll in the sand away from the second one. You recast your shield spell and cast a pair of weak looking stunners. You feel worn down, but not nearly as bad as you are letting on. Make them think that you are wearing out. It might sucker one of them into a mistake.

"Come on James, you can do it!" You hear Sheila's shout. 'Aw Reese, no words of encouragement from you?' You are very hurt.

The downside of casting those weak stunners means that they are easily caught, and now you have to dodge two stunners and two quick tripping hexes. You keep returning fire with the wimpy looking stunners trying to draw someone in. One of them is aggressively near the court's center line. He is taunting you.

"You're going down English boy. We gonna kick you ass back to your little island country." All that time around Ferret-boy makes this guy look like a rank amateur. Not to mention El Dorko Lordo himself. Somehow trash talking during a game just doesn't compare to a really powerful insane wooly buttpounder taunting you, while trying to kill you. On the other hand he is trying to make himself a target. Ask and ye shall receive.

Your tormentor does a nifty little hop and roll out of the way of Paulo's hex and snags your stunner out of the air.

“Is that all you got. Try this little boy!” He throws his stunner and you make your move. During the last few exchanges you had been giving ground. Drifting towards the back of your side of the court. As he casts his spell, their person on the platform fires a tripping hex towards where they expected you to be headed. Instead you do the equivalent of rushing the net, if this were tennis and intercept his stunner. Less than 3 meters separate you.

“Stupefy!” A glorious looking crimson bolt of energy slams right through his weakened shield and drops him like a sack of discarded rubbish. You waste no time and hurl a second stunner while twisting sideways to avoid one that narrowly misses you. The crowd makes some noise. His teammates won’t let him live that one down.

You fall back from mid-court not wanting to press your luck. Paulo calls out “Ref, how long?” How long for what? You wonder dive rolling away from another trip hex followed by stunner combination.

“One minute forty-five seconds.” Until what, you wonder?

“Come on James! Just hold out until then.” Paulo says. Again you wonder what happens in a little over a minute. One of these days, you are going to make people explain things to you beforehand instead of trying to pick everything up along the way. It has a devil-may-care charm to it, but sometimes it is downright annoying isn’t it? How many times would you have used the Knight Bus to slip away from the Dursley’s if you had known about it from the start?

“What happens then?” You shout back at him making another catch.

“Last five minutes by yourself and the other three get to come back out on the court. Keep it up!” Oh, see, ask for answer and get it. It’s simple. You’ll have to do it more often.

Your two opponents are a little unnerved. They weren’t expecting you to have that kind of reserve and determination. The score is seventy-seven to fifty-three. Technically, they could just let you stun them and they would still win. They’d probably do it in a tournament, but not here in a friendly.

At ten seconds remaining, the crowd starts counting down. Reese and Sheila look ready to jump right back in – Karina, not so much. Your opposition senses that they will not be able to get you so they hold the spells until the referee yells, “Five Minutes!”

The trio comes back out onto the court. You shield them and manage to catch one, but poor Karina barely steps onto the court before a stunner catches her in the knee. It takes the wind out of you casting your return spell, but you don’t consider it good sportsmanship as you throw the strongest stunner you can muster. It’s big, fast and pretty. Just like that it is three on one, going your way. The crowd seems a bit bigger now than when the first games started. It’s probably up to seventy-five or eighty people. Not exactly the thousands you are used to performing in front of, but at the moment it’s enough.

Thankfully, Sheila and Reese get the last player. You’re tired, but it was good exercise both physically and magically. Walking over to the sidelines, people are congratulating you. Paulo is already down from the perch and claps you on the back. You’ve probably cemented your status as Chico’s new hero.

“Please tell me you can play tomorrow? Amanda will be here then and we’ll have the whole team.” Paulo asks.

“Yeah sure count me in? Is Karina going to be the alternate?” You reply.

“If she wants.” You look over at her and it looks like she has had enough, but Chico is already urging her on. She agrees after a moment.

It’s nice to see sportsmanship alive and well in South America, as the other team comes over and personally congratulates you. They make a couple of jokes wondering about if your banisher is as strong as your stunner. You have more practice with the stunner, but you lie anyway and tell them it’s stronger with a grin on your face.

You figure out Karina’s reluctance after a few more minutes of pleasantries with your new team. They definitely aren’t the Gryffindor Lions, but they aren’t so bad. Paulo goes to collect the two galleon

each entry fee from everyone. You don't say a word and cover Karina's share. Money is probably going to be an issue between the two of you. You're pretty thick but even you can guess that. Paulo raises an eyebrow, but lets it slide.

She's quiet on the way back. Chico doesn't notice and is currently telling you how good you were out there. It's nice, but hopefully you can head 'Chico the long lost Creevy brother' off at the pass. You have sand in places you didn't think you could get sand in.

You swing through the marketplace on the way back. Karina helps select the things for you. Grocery shopping goes pretty quick and soon you are back at the Machado household. Karina sends Chico into the bath and starts on dinner.

"You're mad at me aren't you?" Since you have not real skills in this area, perhaps you should stick to stating the obvious.

"Do you think I am a whore?" Perhaps you should avoid stating the obvious in the future. Some things are best left unsaid. You remember something good old Uncle Vernon once said about Latin women having a temper. Even that idiot can sometimes stumble on a truth.

"Merlin! No, of course I don't think that." You're not really sure what you think.

"I am not some charity project!" She hisses. Even without the parseltongue you pick that one loud and clear. Okay, maybe you are not getting laid tonight. You know something, you've had enough of this! You are not even pretending to be Harry Potter right now and yet here you are apologizing for being you again.

"Look. I have money, a lot of it. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I've got enough that I didn't even recognize that people were stealing from me! If you can't deal with it, then I better leave now before it gets worse than it already is." You spin to walk out the door.

“I don’t want Chico getting attached to another man who is going to leave him!” She’s got just a few issues. It’s not even a question. One positive thing is she referred to you as a man, not a boy. So once again, you are being judged by the actions of some other bloke – most times it is the ‘prankster Dad extraordinaire’. This time, you are being judged against some pretty much random dead guy, who cheated on his wife and left the woman in front of you in a bad spot. If you weren’t so angry at the moment, you’d stop and wonder why females put up with males in general. Merlin knows if you were a girl, you wouldn’t date guys. Oh well, enough with the introspective crap, back to the matter at hand.

“You know something, Karina? A few years ago, I had nothing and no real hope of getting anything. I was treated like shit for an entire decade, before I found out I was magical. I’ve been trying to put it in the past, so I don’t really feel like talking about it. The point is – you haven’t even gotten close to rock bottom yet. You’ve still got your pride, but after a couple of years that will go to. I would have killed to have a friend trying to help me enjoy life, instead of just trying to get by. I’m not going to think any less of you because of your situation.”

She stops and looks at you. “James, I am sorry. Forgive me.” She’s walking towards you. Okay Mr. Big Speech, what now? Stay or go? She pulls you into an embrace. Maybe, you should stay.

Seven hours later, you are lying on the sleeper sofa staring at the moonlight filtering in through the window. Karina’s naked form is curled up next to you. After dinner, the three of you played Chico’s favorite boardgames for a few hours. Once he went to bed, Karina offered you a chance to use her shower while she cleaned your clothes. You were quite pleased at the turn of events when she joined you in the small shower. She claimed that there were some places she always had problems getting the sand out of. People have always said what a helpful and generous person you are. It’s a calling, really. The biggest lesson you learned tonight was that make-up sex is physically and emotionally draining. A few days ago, you asked Bill about his relationship with Fleur. You didn’t understand it when he said, “Sometimes, she starts arguing with me for no particular reason about something she obviously knows is wrong – if you know what I

mean?” You nodded, but didn’t really know what he meant. You do now – they’re both nutters!

“Still awake?” Karina mumbles in your ear. Maybe it is the fact you have a naked woman curled up next to you. You don’t want to admit to her that this sleeper sofa has seen better days and the hammock in the expedition tent is much more comfortable.

“Yeah. Not really used to being in a bed with someone else,” you say.

“I feel like I am just using you.” She confesses in a whisper.

You answer with candor that surprises even you. “I need this as much as you do. We’re using each other and we’re honest about it. It’s more consideration than I am used to. There is nothing wrong with two people, who need support and comfort giving it to each other. Besides, I’ve got a new favorite game now because of you.”

“You really like dodgespell more than your quidditch?”

You pause, sighing dramatically. The game of dodgespell excites you in different ways than quidditch. Being a good seeker is a reflection of speed and skill. Dodgespell is more power oriented and almost feels like a duel. Both get the blood pumping. Too bad you aren’t talking about either of them. Oh, you should really answer her.

“No, silly my new favorite game is ‘innocent young man gets corrupted by very sexy woman’ and I think I am entitled to a rematch.”

Author’s notes – So there you have it dodgespell or at least the pickup version. I’ll post the basic rules and gameplay in my profile on fanfiction dot net. If you decide to use it in your story all I ask is that you credit me. Let me know what you think. Thanks to those who have comprised the 250 reviews I have so far and thanks for sticking with the story so far. Jim



Disclaimer – “If you don’t own me by now, you will never, ever own me.” I don’t own Harry Potter – too bad.

Acknowledgements – Real life has taken a toll on my reviewing team. This chapter exists through my efforts and the well-directed criticisms of IP82, Nonjon, ChuckdaTruck and Nukular Winter. The rest of the team including beta are MIA for the moment.

Apologies – I misspelled the country of Australia last chapter. I hope I didn’t offend anyone down under. I’ll fix it soon.

## Chapter 10 – Lions and Tigers, who wait in the Shadows

After a quick apparition from Karina’s house, you are heading back up to the room you are currently sharing with Bill carrying a bag with your shrunken groceries in it. You need a change of clothes for the tournament, plus Bill might want to drop by. Karina offered to fix you breakfast, but you said you would get something here at the hotel. You already told her that next weekend you would be traveling. Didn’t really want to rub in the fact you are going to be participating in an animagus ritual. She smiled and said it was okay. You weren’t really sure what to expect. If she was one of the fangirls, you reckon she would be devastated, but she’s a grown woman and the both of you are having some kind of fling. Though on the positive side, she cryptically mentioned that she would have to give you a proper send off. Intrigued by that statement you gave her a quick peck and then apparated away.

You pull out your room key after you exit the elevator. There’s a note on the door and the “Do Not Disturb” sign up.

Cookie,

I went ahead and got you your own room. Just go down to the front desk and pick up the key for room 412 when you get back. You can pick your stuff up in the morning, if you know what I mean?

Bill

“No Bill, I don’t know what you mean. I rarely ever know what you mean! Could you be a bit more vague please?” You mutter under your breath. Maybe you can call in a life debt or something and have him stop calling you ‘Cookie’. That whole escape from Serpent Mountain ought to be worth something right? Sounds like Bill wanted a night of decent sleep. Maybe the pressure is getting to him. After all, he is one of probably a handful of people on this planet that knows how old Tom “Riddle me this Batman” is keeping himself alive and at the moment it appears that he is the only one doing an effing thing about it! Well it’s morning, so you might as well grab your stuff.

You open the door. Ignoring Bill’s mess, you head over to the still set up tent and open your trunk in the area you share with Thundercloud. You grab a handful of clothes for the tournament and a fresh bandana. You enlarge the packages of food you stored in Karina’s chill box last night and put them in the tent’s chill box. Shopping is so much easier with magic. No ten trips out to Uncle Vernon’s car. No, ‘Boy! If you break even a single egg, you will be sorry.’ You wonder if he liked the boogers you used to toss into his omelets. Too bad heat kills most things. Hey, in your defense you were nine at the time. Now, you could come up with much more creative forms of retribution. For the time, it was bloody brilliant, if you don’t mind saying so. Almost got caught once or twice, but the son of James and Lily was no Ghandi. Passive resistance only carried you so far.

Stepping out of the magic tent and back into the hotel room. You look around. On the dresser with the television on it there is an empty bottle of wine and a half-empty tub of whipped cream. What in Merlin’s name was Bill doing in here last night? Oh good, the bathroom door is opening. You can get some answers. Not good, it isn’t Bill. Good, it’s Fleur. Not good, she just screamed at you. Good, she’s only in a towel. Even better, the towel is only wrapped around her head! Break out the pensieve, because it’s a great day to be alive! Holy basket of house elf eggs, it’s a naked veela! Though, you are not entirely sure where house elves come from. You jump back in the tent as Fleur unleashes a string of French vulgarities at you. Wonder which one was French for pervert trying to memorize every single detail? At least she didn’t immediately have her wand on her. You are certain because there was absolutely nowhere she could have hidden it from your sight. You resist the urge to do a quick

victory lap around the inside of the tent. Damn, they better not oblivate you!

“Harry! What in the hell are you doing here?” Bill says over the still continuing wave of French obscenities as he pokes his head into the tent. Seriously Fleur, slow down and take a breath or something.

“I just got back and needed a change of clothes. Your note said come and get my stuff in the morning. It’s morning.”

“You should have let us know you were in here. At the end of the note, I said ‘If you know what I mean!’ Didn’t you get it?”

“Here’s a newsflash Bill, I didn’t know what you mean! I’m not a mind reader. I can barely protect my own much less read yours.” Actually, it isn’t true. You managed to get into old Snapey’s skull once – pretty much by accident, but then again how much of your existence is based off of one accident followed by another?

“You’re right. Listen, just give us five minutes.” Bill says pausing to listen to what Fleur is screeching about. His French is improving, but it still takes him a minute to understand what she is saying. “No, I will not let you castrate him. Actually Harry, why don’t you sit there at the table and I’ll come get you when it’s safe.”

Not wishing to lose any equipment, especially since you have just discovered a productive use for said equipment, you sit and read a book for a solid fifteen minutes before Bill returns.

“She’s calm now. You can come out now.” He says reassuringly.

“Are you sure?” Hey, it is your bits that are being discussed here. You could always apparate out of here.

“Positive.”

You exit and see Fleur sitting on the bed. She is in a terrycloth bathrobe and still has an aura about her that says ‘Come hither and ravage me’. You bet she could make Dudley’s clothes look sexy. Small wonder Bill is such an obsessive sex fiend.

“Hello, Fleur.”

“Good morning, Harry. We have to stop meeting like this.” She says with a smile. She looks – harmless, but you shouldn’t trust her.

“Yes, otherwise you will positively ruin me for every other woman on the planet.” You answer with a cheeky grin. Not a half bad comeback, she seems to like it. Bill shoots you a glare for a moment before laughing.

“It’s okay dear, I think you might be a little young for our Harry here. He has an eye for the older ladies. You did say that you just got back and needed a change of clothing didn’t you? You dirty dog?” Bill does that ruffle your hair thing. You’ve never really liked that. Is there a charm that will make your hair sting, bite or otherwise annoy someone who touches your hair? Maybe a nice electric shock? It warrants further investigation.

“Err, yes.” Wonder if Fleur would be upset if you castrated Bill. It’s a pretty nice blush you have going there in the mirror Harry isn’t it?

Fleur of course sensing your embarrassment proceeds to interrogate you about the current status of your love life. Tenacious wench isn’t she? Bill is helpfully providing answers when you politely refuse her queries. Her expression darkens when the topic of Chico comes up. She tells you to be wary of the single mother. You can’t believe you are saying this to anyone much less Fleur, but you explain that you and Karina are comfortable with the purely physical relationship you have at the moment. It probably didn’t come out that way, but that’s the gist of what you were saying.

The two of them are positively ruthless. Finally Fleur asks, “ So does she think you are any good?” Pervert Bill is guffawing at this point. You should have apparated away five minutes ago. They’re obviously having a good old time at your expense. Might as well give some back and show them you aren’t afraid to play.

“I can honestly say, that I make her scream some other guy’s name or at least my alias, but as memory serves me, you are a bit louder

than she is. Anyway, the reason I stopped by other than for a change of clothes is I'm playing in a Dodgespell tournament on the beach today and figured I would invite the cackling Hyena over there. You're welcome to come too." Fleur's resulting blush and muttering has you watching for her little stick with her Grandmum's hair in it.

Bill had heard of the sport before, but Fleur hadn't and seemed eager to see it after your brief description. She apparently isn't leaving until tomorrow night. Maybe you can convince Karina to come out to the hotel this evening? Perhaps Bill and Fleur could watch Chico for an hour or so and the two of you could experience something a bit more comfortable than the sleeper sofa, the tiny shower or a bunch of cushions tossed on the floor. You do have to admit that the cushioning charm on the kitchen table was interesting enough.

You go down, pickup your room key and wait for Bill and Fleur to join you for breakfast. You made a joke about how could they be hungry after all that whipped cream and beat a hasty retreat into the hallway. At least in all that hubbub, they didn't oblivate you! Bill mentioned that he had already secured the second set of permits – yay Black fortune and was now free for the rest of the weekend.

"In all the commotion of this morning, I forgot to thank you for saving my Bill's life." Fleur says sitting down next to you. Her plate has what can be describe as a 'dainty' breakfast, whereas your plate would like most things about your life make Ron jealous.

"Oh, I am sure he was exaggerating." You wave dismissively at her claims.

She catches your wrist with her delicate looking, but surprisingly strong hand. "I brought my mother's pensieve to help Bill with the expedition and he showed me what you did. You are too modest, Harry. I am glad now, that you did not come to France with me."

Now she is really embarrassing you. Can't she go back to making jokes about your sex life or something? You stammer out a reply, "I did what needed to be done. It's not like I'm Merlin or anything."

“No, you are Harry Potter, but remember even Merlin and Charlemagne were once your age. Consider what Madame Maxine or your Dumbledore had accomplished at this stage of their lives. Both are powerful magic users, qui.” She has a point and a beautiful smile that says ‘don’t bother to deny it or I will continue’. You decide to accept it as the compliment it is intended to be. Though it is tempting to make a statement about ‘your Dumbledore’.

“Bill’s lucky to have you.”

If possible her smile glowed even more brilliantly before turning to her breakfast, “Extremely lucky, almost as lucky as I am to have him.”

Bill joined you a moment later with his plate rivaling your’s in size and the three of you talked and laughed. It was a great morning, just three friends having breakfast. No Dark Lords, no constantly looking over your shoulder, no being cooped up in a heavily warded house being afraid for your life – just three friends enjoying a meal and companionship. You wonder if that is what is really meant by the whole ‘neither can live’ part? If Fleur is right and you are some kind of legendary hero, don’t you deserve a bit of a break every now and then?

Four hours later you are kneeling in the sand utterly spent. The tournament was made up of sixteen teams. Your team won the first game handily. Your banisher is not as strong as your stunner, but it was close. The highlight of that game was when Paulo’s banisher was rebounding off the dueling wards and hit the person you had just hit causing the crowd of over seven hundred to cheer wildly and just like that Paulo’s Punishers had moved into the round of eight, earning a nice break while the rest of the first round finished on the two courts.

Much to your chagrin, you were checked over for enchantments before the initial match. The referee made you remove and reapply both your hair coloring charm and the translation charm. Karina raised an eyebrow at you when your black hair was revealed. Fortunately for you, another game was in progress so hardly anyone was paying attention to you and the referee. When she questioned you about it, you responded that it is widely known that ‘Blondes have more fun.’ Fleur agreed. You could tell that Karina was a bit put off by

Fleur's presence. The part-veela was certainly drawing her share of attention. Bill kept her hand comfortably in his in a somewhat protective manner. It was amusing watching Reese trying to sneak a glance at Fleur without getting caught. So far he was one for six. Not a very good average in your opinion. You were beginning to worry that if he kept it up, Sheila was going to seriously injure him and Karina would have to play as a substitute.

The second game was a bit closer. Reese went out first and did a fine job as the harasser. Paulo's female friend Amanda went down next followed by Paulo himself. With the odds three against you and Sheila, the two of you managed to squeak out a victory. Sheila had a real talent for calculating where to throw her curse against the wards. After the game, she said that she sometimes picks up some extra money in the pool halls against the muggles – err norms, before giving you a big predatory grin and recommending that you should play her sometime. It's probably not a good idea. It would be quicker to just give her your money. You get the sense she is flirting with you a bit, most likely to draw Reese's eyes off of Fleur. Seems to be working, as Reese started giving you the AK stare.

Karina walked with you over to the vendors to get a drink. "Is Bill's friend a veela?"

"It runs in her family. Fleur's really good for him."

"I have only ever heard of them, but watching Reese's, Paulo's and most other's reactions I came to that conclusion. Why don't you act like that?"

So that's what this is about, "Oh, the veela charm doesn't really affect me all that much, or Bill either for that matter. We're pretty good friends, I guess. She actually appreciates that I can talk to her without turning into an idiot. I save that for when I am talking to you."

Her sly smile is a nice reward for that compliment. You figure it's got to be worth a few brownie points to be able to resist attractive women in her presence. You could completely waste all of them if you followed it by saying, 'Oh and I've already seen her naked today, so I don't need to gawk like that.' Not being one to brag, but you have

seen two completely naked, extremely hot women in the last twelve hours.

As you lined up for your third game, you recognized your opponents from the games yesterday. It was the smooth and professional team, which wiped the court with your team yesterday. You doubted that the five minute rule would save you this time. Inside the dueling wards they were just as good if not better. They seemed very interested in knocking you out as you leaped over a banisher and caught the second one. Amanda played the curse off the wall and caught it before it went back into play. Both of you concentrate your attack on their captain. Your timing is right, as your faster spell reaches him just as he is dodging Amanda's fire. It turns out that it was a really bad idea to eliminate their captain. He was merciless from the harasser perch. You didn't last much longer as a tripping hex sent you stumbling into the path of a banisher. Paulo was the last one out there, but then he too was eliminated.

The good news was that you have one more match to play – the consolation game against the other team eliminated in the semi-finals. It would determine the third place and fourth place finishers. The fourth place team essentially would receive their entrance fee back. The third place team doubles their money.

The game starts in a flurry of spells. You make a quick catch and go for a direct shot against one of the females on the other team. It's not hard, the whole team is made up of females. They're pretty good. Angelina, Alicia and Katie would be proud – go girl power, you suppose. Right now you are concentrating on trying to banish them.

They seem to have a lot of teamwork and coordination going for them. Your team is sadly lacking these things. You dive into the path of a banisher and make the catch protecting Shelia.

"Far right. I'll throw off the wards, you go straight at her." She whispers lining up her own shot.

You nod and cast hard at the brunette at the right side of the court. Reminds you of a Latin looking Pansy Parkinson. You shouldn't judge a girl just because she resembles someone you despise but then



again, this girl has never met Pansy before. She catches yours with her glove, but Sheila's with her stomach. So long Pansy look alike!

Sheila and Amanda are eliminated next by a very well executed attack. Looks like it's a gender battle now – three blokes versus four ladies. Paulo and Reese work to even up the odds and take out one of the ladies. The next five banishers come your way. You dodge, catch and spin your way out of trouble.

"Come on James!" Karina and Chico's shouts urge you on. Another minute of dodging ends your game as they finally get you. As you drag yourself off the court, you are exhausted. At least with them focusing on you Paulo and Reese are fresh and they are methodically eliminating the opposition. Karina hands you a bottle of water and helps brush some of the sand off of you. The real downside of having a competitive spirit is watching the game go on with out you.

"You looked good out there. I'm impressed." Bill says from his seat as Paulo sends another to the sidelines.

"I'm sure Kwan would find a way to insult me, but I held on as long as I could. Looks like we're going to pull it out though." You really don't like sitting and watching do you?

The game ends with Reese getting the last female out. Third place is pretty good. You exchange a few pleasantries with the all-female team you had just beaten and then watch the finals get started. It's a real good game and you actually manage to cheer on the team that eliminated your team. They win rather impressively.

Paulo comes back from the judges with your winnings. A pair of children are following him. "Miss Karina! Miss Karina!" The two children come over smiling. Karina's expression becomes guarded, much like when she first encountered Paulo.

"Hello children. Have you been on your best behavior for your new governess?" she says giving them a small smile. These must be Renaldo's children. Something ugly is coming. You've got a bad feeling.

“Yes Miss Karina. Miss Audrey is nice, but we miss having you and Chico around.” The boy says. The girl is slightly younger. She is quiet, but smiling at Chico.

“Elise! Miguel! What are you doing? Get away from her!” A female voice cuts through the crowd.

The two children jump as if stung as you get your first glimpse of Nina Colastos. She is a couple of inches shorter than Karina. Her face is rounded and her eyes are more gray than blue. If you had to guess, she is probably in her early thirties and attended the Parvati school of over applying makeup. Too bad you didn’t know Luna during your fourth year, she would have made a more interesting date than Parvati. Anyway, the end result is the woman in front of you is somewhat attractive in a purchased with money kind of way.

The widow Colastos has her wand out and is walking deliberately towards Karina. “I told you to stay away from my children, you dirty whore. I should curse you where you stand.”

“This is a public place. I have just as much right to be here as you do. Your money can not buy everything.” Karina says with a rather dismissive tone.

You have to admit that Karina is cool under pressure. She must have experience dealing with Nina. Your wand is in your hand, but Karina hasn’t moved at all.

“You never knew your place. You are a common dog! A dog! Maybe, you should be put down like one? Maybe your little bastard too?” She moves her wand in the general direction of Chico.

You step in front of Chico. “Point that elsewhere.” A quick glance over at Paulo shows that he is merely observing the action – so much for help from local law enforcement.

“Well, well what do we have here?” Nina says coldly while sizing you up. “Selling yourself to the foreigners already? Seems a little young for your taste, Machado, but I suppose his gold spends just the

same.” She shrugs at the small crowd growing around her. The two men behind her are holding their wands, must be her bodyguards.

You reply with a quick lie, “I am not really sure what you are talking about, but you are pointing your wand at a five year old boy with over a dozen witnesses.”

Some of the pomp around her disappeared as she immediately lowered her wand, “Silly little boy, of course I wasn’t pointing my wand at a child. I resent that implication!” Oh great, it’s the return of Delores Umbridge!

The nice thing about not being in school is that you can play at this game too. “Obviously my mistake, Madame. There is certainly no way a woman of your obvious age could make that kind of gross error in judgment, let alone say such horrible things in the presence of your own children. Please accept my apologies.” You catch a few snickers from the crowd.

If looks could kill, well if that were the truth you’d be dead a long time ago. Technically, there are a few creatures with looks that can kill. You have personal experience. Fortunately, the thing in front of you is not one.

“We’ll be leaving now. Good day to you, widow Colastos. Miguel, good luck in school next year and Elise, I hope you are continuing with your piano lessons.” Karina says in that same even tone. You bet she would be pretty good at Occulmency. Nina takes a step closer to her and mouths something at Karina, before turning away and motioning for her bodyguards and children to follow.

Karina watches them go and the crowd disperses. She looks first at you and you get the feeling that you just screwed up again. “I did not need your help.” Next, she looks at Paulo, who seems indifferent to Karina. “I could have used yours.” Then she too, spins on her heels and leads Chico off at a brisk pace.

You start to follow, but Paulo’s hand stops you. He has a cold calculating look on his face. “You should be careful of the people you insult, Englishman. Unlike the great city in the distance, our society

does not need to cater to the tourists. Don't go making trouble for Karina or yourself."

"Odd, I wasn't the one waving a wand around back there, Mr. Vangelder. Yet here you are warning me."

"Consider it friendly advice, Black. You wouldn't want to see my not-so friendly advice. A young kid like you could get yourself hurt by crossing the wrong people. Karina is a good friend, but she is in a bad situation. Don't make her situation any worse. You'll go back home eventually and she'll be left behind to deal with any mess you might make."

Oh, cringe in fear! Oh, the horror! It's the good cop and bad cop routine from the same person. You almost want to mock him by asking if some jealous bint and her bodyguards are going to do what a Dark Lord, Death Eaters, Dragons, a Basilisk and a little piss ant named Draco have all wanted to do? Fortunately, you hold your tongue and nod indifferently at him. You get the idea that the PdM enforces the laws for the wealthy families. Three bought-and-paid-for cheers for corruption!

Grabbing the rest of your stuff, you give a quick wave to the rest of your teammates. Sheila is the only one who returns your wave with a smile. Amanda didn't know you from dirt and Reese seems to prefer dirt to your company. Bill and Fleur are waiting for you and Bill is particularly interested in your exchange with Paulo. He doesn't want the PdM poking their nose into the expedition. Fleur is maintaining her appearance of detached indifference, but you suspect she has been following every single word. People don't expect someone that beautiful to have brains. There's a lot more to her than the vain sounding arrogant teenager who called you a 'little boy' two years ago.

"You should go and speak to Karina, but wait an hour or so for her to calm down. Bill and I are going to head back to the hotel, where he is going to buy me an expensive dinner and take me dancing. We'll see you for breakfast tomorrow." Fleur says idly looking out over the ocean. Hopefully, it's not too expensive given the probable source of money for the dinner. You don't say anything. It would sound petty

and both Bill and Fleur have been very good to you. Better them than Dumbledore and his flunkies.

“I’ll remember to knock this time.” You reply sidestepping a playful punch from Bill start down the beach for a walk. After a kilometer of walking, you pass a sign. It’s facing the opposite direction so you walk around it to see what it says. The top says ‘Humans Only Past This Point’. The lines beneath it are in two different languages. You recognize one as Goblin. The one beneath it is a pictogram language. Looking at the beachgoers, you suppose that it is either giant or most likely troll. The goblins don’t like the daylight, but from the number of firepits it looks like they come down in the evenings. The trolls here seem about the same size as the security trolls Dumbledore stationed at the common room when Sirius attacked the Fat Lady. Thank Merlin they aren’t as big as the one from the bathroom! You sit up on a rock and watch two male trolls show off for some troll females. They are picking up rocks and throwing them in the water. Whenever the rock hits the water they yell, “Plunk!” It’s apparently a distance contest.

After ten minutes the troll nearest you exclaims, “Glurg Win Plunk!” and thumps his chest. He dances a taunting dance around the other troll, who grows tired of it almost immediately and punches his tormentor. The two trolls wrestle and the one called Glurg manages to pin the other troll. You can’t quite hear what they say, but Glurg climbs up and all three of the troll females walk off with him. The other troll looks on dejectedly. Looks like you aren’t the only one with girl problems.

“What human want? Hack have day off.”

“I don’t want anything. I was just watching you play Plunk.”

“Glurg always wins Plunk. Girl Trolls like Glurg.”

Not really believing you are having this conversation you continue, “Don’t throw your stone so high. You put too much loft in it.” Great, now you are about to explain the concept of loft to a troll.

“High stone make bigger Plunk.” The troll answers not quite getting it.

“Yes, but if your stone goes farther then you win right? See watch this. I throw a stone like Hack.” You pick up a small stone and throw it in a high arc like the smaller troll was doing it makes a comparatively small Plunk. You then grab a second one and throw it more like regular ball. It goes much farther and still makes a good sized – for a human, Plunk.

Hack looks very excited. You actually wish Creevy would show up with his camera. Luna will definitely get a laugh out of this. For the next fifteen minutes you help Hack the troll with his throwing mechanics. You remember when one of your primary school classmates had his uncle come in. He was a decathlete. You recall how he threw the shotput by putting his body into the throw. It takes a few tries and Hack falls in the sand more than once, but now his throws are going much further. He’ll definitely win his next game of Plunk.

“Next time Hack win Plunk. Hack get girl trolls.” Shit! Now you’re talking like a troll.

“Human help Hack. Hack like human.”

“James. My name is James.”

“Hack like James. James help Hack. Hack throw big stones. Big stones get girl trolls.” There’s probably a lesson for you in all this. Big stones get the girls. Maybe it’s time you get some big stones of your own figuratively of course.

“Bye Hack.”

“Bye Puny James.” He smacks you shoulder and knocks you two meters forward. Felt like you just took another banisher. Note to self – horseplay with a troll is not a great idea.

Summoning your own courage, you apparate to Karina’s house and knock on the door. She answers it with that same impassive look on her face. “Yes.”

“I seem to have a knack for angering you.”

“Yes you do.” she answers with a curt reply. It’s a bit frosty out here.

“Are you worried about her retaliating?”

“I am always worried about her. She obsessed with ruining my life and Chico’s life. This is not your problem. You shouldn’t involve yourself.” The temperature is definitely dropping rapidly. You should have brought a coat.

“You should ward your house.”

She looks at you exasperated. “With what? The wardcrafters guild doesn’t work for free and with the Colastos family angry with me, I doubt they would do it anyway.”

You can’t help feeling a bit annoyed yourself. “Trying to be helpful here...”

Karina is quiet for the next ten seconds. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be taking this out on you. I don’t know how to do it myself and don’t have the money to get it done by professionals.”

“Bill is teaching me. I’ll do it. It will be good practice. I’ve already got a basic intruder ward built. I’ll just need to key you two to the ward stones and at least you’ll know if someone is on your property. It’s nothing fancy, but something is better than nothing.”

Her expression softens a bit. “My grandmother said that being foolish, quick to anger and stubborn are three of my least attractive traits. I was angry with Paulo, for not doing anything, so I treated you unfairly. All you did was step between an angry wand and my son. Refusing your offer would be even more foolish on my part. If you really want to do this, I would be even more indebted to you.”

“You’re not indebted to me. We’re friends. We help each other out. I’ll just apparate back to the hotel and pick up the ward stones. So am I forgiven?” Besides people who are indebted to you haven’t been behaving very nicely towards you lately.

“Yes, James you are. We are having feijoada tonight.” You are still not sure exactly why you have done that requires her forgiveness, but you should quit while you’re ahead. It’s safer that way.

“Sounds great! Would you like to come to the hotel for their breakfast buffet tomorrow? I can bring the Portkey we have for the two of you.”

Karina looks uncertain. Chico immediately asks if there is a television there. She scolds him, but he goes for the puppy dog eyes. She reluctantly agrees. You apparate back to the hotel and go to Bill’s room and knock on the door. Bill answers. He has a nice dress shirt on and has a tie dangling over his neck. You have a good idea what they were up to in the time since you last saw them. There probably isn’t any whipped cream left.

“Just got dumped?”

“No, git! I was going to get those perimeter wards I made and set them up at Karina’s. It will at least tell her if someone is there.”

“Probably not a bad idea since that woman looked a bit on the angry side. Go in my trunk in the tent and there is a book called ‘Practical Warding of the Magical Household’. There are several examples of easy to install warding schemes. It’s not the best book out there by far, but it is a practical step-by-step setup of a basic warding system. It even has some decent permanent size increasing runes that can give her more space. Dad and Uncle Gideon did the ones at the Burrow. I remember watching them when I was four or five and that’s when I made up my mind that I wanted to be a cursebreaker. You can do most of the prep work during the week, when you’re not stoned out of your gourd or flying around looking for more dragons.”

“Thanks for mentioning that.” You’re not really looking forward to all these hallucinations Thundercloud was talking about as a side effect of the animagus potion.

You emerge five minutes later with your carving stones, the portkey and the book Bill mentioned. Though you were tempted to grab ‘Violent Runes Unleashed – A Compendium for Those with the Skill



and the Willingness to use it'. It looked like a fascinating tome. That one definitely goes on your 'to read' list.

Fleur is looking like a million galleons, but still acting like she needs to make herself more beautiful and Bill is doing his whole 'ruggedly handsome' look with the dragon fang earring. You ask him what he would say if a muggle asked him about it. He smiles and says in that case, "It's the front tooth from a Grizzly Bear."

You tell them to have a wonderful evening and apparate back to the street in front of Karina's house. She tells you that dinner is in thirty minutes. You use a basic detection spell to determine how many charging runes the property can support for continuous use. It requires that you pace the property while chanting the spell. You then finish the incantation standing at the center of the property and you will see a group of colored lights. The number of lights equals the number of charging runes that the property can support. Three little blue lights dance in front of your eyes. That's a pretty low number. You flip to the appendix of the book and look for recommendations for three charging rune schemes. The list is remarkably short. You'll use one rune for the size expansion and the other two for the basic perimeter and shielding wards. You can create a fourth charging rune, which won't charge continuously, for a weak stinging hex or minor confundo but it will only last for about thirty seconds. Still thirty seconds of pain or confusion could buy the two of them a chance to escape. Tomorrow, you'll ask Bill if you should leave that Portkey for them as a means of escape, since she can't apparate, doesn't have a floo connection and her broom isn't exactly built for speed.

Over dinner, you explain the warding scheme. Surprisingly, Karina asks you to forgo the size expansion and commit the third rune to powering the confundus charm. Instead of thirty seconds, it will last ninety seconds and gradually recharge. Originally, she thought about the stinging hex, but seemed a little leery of injuring someone who was coming for a visit. She says that she is comfortable with the amount of space in the house. You don't really believe her, but hey that's what she wants. Flipping around in the book you find a couple of nifty single use wand activated wards including a volley of three arrows from a ward known as 'The Archer's Last Stand'. It was immensely popular in the Middle Ages for castle protection. They

spread out in a fan, so there is no real aiming. It looks difficult to carve, but you like a challenge. The downside is it can only be used once, and won't last more than a couple of months unless carved in metal or bone. You picked up some dragonbone and etching material with your resupply kit yesterday at the same time you got a cheap broom for Bill.

The final plans call for a perimeter ward and alert system at the edge of the property. Five meters from the door the confundus charm kicks in. On each side of the front and back doors you would mount 'The Archer's Last Stand'. On the outside of the front door you will carve a shield rune and on the back side a rune to increase the strength of the wood. The shield rune wouldn't stop more than two or three spells, but Karina seems grateful for even that token level of protection.

During her first few weeks after she had been fired, she had been watched. One of the two bodyguards you had just encountered had made it a point to walk through her neighborhood and the four hens and rooster one of her neighbors had given her were mysteriously found dead in her backyard.

After dinner, Karina takes Chico for a ride on your broom while you mount the controlling rune you had already carved with a permanent sticking charm right below the outside of the kitchen windowsill. You spread the alarm wards at the four corners of the property. She has a small vegetable garden in the back. Bill's book recommends that the charging runes be carved on inconspicuous surfaces in the house. You take down a picture of a younger Karina holding a sleeping baby Chico. The baby wakes up and the mother glares at you as she comforts the upset child. Good thing the camera pictures aren't like portraits and able to speak, because you are pretty certain that she is telling you off right now.

You scourgify the surface of the wood where the framed picture had been hung. A piece of coarse sandpaper followed by fine sandpaper finishes preparing the surface. Using a carpenter's pencil, you outline the shape of a charging rune. Satisfied that the shape is correct, you begin working with the tiny carving chisel and hammer. It takes you just over twenty minutes. Bill could have done it in five – further reminding you that you are just a neophyte at this.

After you finish, you cast the spell that activates the rune and watch pleasantly as the rune begins to glow softly. The picture of Karina gives you another dirty look as you rehang it. You smile and blow her a kiss. She gives you the finger. The rune linking charm connects the charging rune to your hidden controller rune. For the next step you link the intruder wards to the controlling rune and key yourself to each of the ward stones. Now you will not set off the wards.

Karina and a smiling Chico land and she hands you back your broom. She compliments you on how much better it flies than hers and Chico is begging you to take him up for a ride now.

You show Karina how to key herself and her wand to the wards that will cause her wand to emit a series of three loud whistles. You have Chico demonstrate by stepping on to the property. He seems particularly pleased when his mother's wand starts whistling. You have him try from several points on the property. If she is within a kilometer of her property and something larger than a dog steps on it, she'll know. Then she keys Chico to the perimeter wards.

The wood over the inside of the door is a perfect spot for the second charging rune. Right next to it you put the controlling rune. On the front of the door you start carving the Tal, Elb, Chez, Viros and the Urwhy runes in a precise pentagon. Chico plays with his toys while Karina holds her wand and gives you light for you to work. It takes thirty minutes to carve each of the shielding runes. Around eleven-thirty at night, five hours after starting you are pleased to watch the thin shield begin to envelope the house and fade from view. A quick glance with your cursebreaker specs confirms that the shield is there and still gaining strength. This particular shielding scheme is most effective against blasting and bludgeoning spells as intruders typically try and break or batter the door down. It isn't very strong, but it is one of the few that also includes anti-apparition wards in the scheme. You found it under the section titled 'Doing More with Less'. You call it a night rather pleased with yourself and thankful that you already had the perimeter wards done. Otherwise it would be lunchtime the next day before you could get this far. The confundus ward can wait for tomorrow and the single use wards during the week. Bill can probably be persuaded to bring them by and mount them while you are off with

Thundercloud. He'll probably want to come by and check your work tomorrow anyway.

Chico is already in bed and you're in desperate need of a shower. With Karina preferred, but either way you're taking one. The good news is she slips in with you after a couple of minutes. 'Sorry Hack, it looks like you're the only socially inept troll, who isn't going to get lucky tonight.'

In the morning you discover that Karina is a bit frisky. It is an extremely pleasant discovery, but nonetheless will delay your departure for breakfast. Of course, you are reasonably certain that Bill and Fleur aren't leaving their room until you knock on their door. So after some morning 'activities', Karina goes to wake up Chico and you go wait outside like you are just arriving. She doesn't want Chico to see you in her bed and recalling his recent comment about your fatherly prospects, you wholeheartedly agree. The three of you take the Portkey and you listen to Chico's howl of glee. You bet the tyke will even like apparition and floo travel. Where's the justice in that?

After collecting Bill and Fleur, the five of you have a rather enjoyable breakfast. Chico insists on sitting between his mother and Fleur. Several times he just looks at the Frenchwoman and goes, "You're pretty. I like you." For a five year old he has some pretty smooth moves - a damn shot better than you at that age or maybe even now. Hell, which of you was the one playing with a troll yesterday? His mother scolds him playfully and both you and Bill are trying very hard not to convulse in laughter. Fleur is a bit flustered at first, but soon gets into the swing of things. She cautions Bill that she has other options now, but can't say it with a straight face. Mothers of adolescent girls all over the region should be warned in advance about this little Don Juan in training.

Bill inspects your work at Karina's house with a critical eye. Two of your shield runes are slightly dovetailed and the imprecise carving will result in a fractional loss in strength, your perimeter wards are not correctly positioned for maximum coverage and your second controller rune was placed too close to the door.

"It seemed logical to put it there!" You argue your case.

“Exactly. That’s the first place I’d look for one. You need to be a bit more devious when placing your runes. That’s the crafty part of the title ‘wardcrafter’. Overall it’s a passable setup. It’s pretty good for your first solo. If I were grading you, I’d give it an Acceptable leaning towards Exceeds Expectations. Concentrate on your carving more. Also, link the charging rune for the perimeter wards to the controlling rune for your shield. If someone completely takes out your perimeter wards, the extra power will funnel into the shield and it will last longer. That’s something you won’t find in most books.”

“What do I have to do to get an Outstanding?” You ask.

“Golden rule, wards are never Outstanding until they stop someone.” You were hoping to make it through a day without a new and different golden rule - so much for that dream. You look over at Fleur, who shrugs helplessly. Apparently, she’s accepted the game as well.

The rest of the morning is spent carving the six runes that make up the confundus runic scheme. Bill shows you where he would place the various components and you go to work, while everyone else goes to the beach. You’re getting better at the charging and controlling runes and they don’t take nearly as long. Of course using Bill’s preferred locations puts you in some very uncomfortable positions. It was one of the Golden Rules from last week, “Precise placement of a ward is more important than the comfort of the person placing the ward.” Gah! Write a book or make a desktop calendar or something!

After completing the ward, but not activating it, you apparate up to the beach, but you can’t find them. Unable to find your group, you pop back to the house and pull out your shrunken journal.

Dear Harry,

Thank you, for the minor heart attack I just had reading your last entry! Encounters with dragons are NOT the kind of thing one just mentions in casual conversations. You really need to work on your writing skills! I’m going to go out on a limb here and assume that this tomb you were in was slightly more terrifying than you led me to

believe. I'm not asking for a pensieve memory or anything, but writing "There were a whole bunch of snakes in the corridor. It was pretty scary. Then when we got out, there was a dragon fighting with two wyverns." leaves a bit to be desired. More details please!

I on the other hand have had no such encounters of my own, though there was a very shifty looking squirrel in our camp the other day. Nothing happened, but I had my wand just in case things got ugly.

The Greak Snorkack hunt of '96 is winding down with only one more week to go before we head back to civilization. My summer assignments are all done, so now I am on to my independent studies. I picked up a few dueling books and a practice wand with no core in it in the last town we stopped in. Speaking of my wand, I don't know if I ever told you the story of it. Looney tells it better, but here it is anyway.

The wood is from an 800 year old Douglas Fir tree, that was destroyed in the eruption of Mount St. Helens in America. Mummy and Daddy were vacationing there hoping to attend a Sasquatch tribal meeting, when the volcano erupted. They decided to take a trip there to see the devastation first hand. Daddy told me that Mum was drawn to this one massive tree so they harvested the wood from it.

To make a long story short, (I'll tell you the long story sometime and most of it is actually true) Mum and Dad found themselves at a Sasquatch meeting and my wand core is a braid of hair from seven Sasquatch chieftans. Pretty nifty as well as being Arithmatically significant huh? When they got back from the trip Mum discovered that she was pregnant with yours truly and they took the wood and the braid to Ollivander and he made a custom wand out of it. Every May 18th, the wand shakes uncontrollably for a few minutes, but other than that it is a very powerful wand. So that's my cool wand story. You mentioned something about your wand in the interview you gave that Skeeter woman for Daddy's paper. How about telling me the whole story?

Well that's all for now. I need to go brew some medicinal potions for my nerves in preparation for your next entry.

Your favorite nightlight,

Luna

You decide to start your reply.

Dear Luna,

Deranged squirrels? I'm scared for you. I am sorry that my skills with the written word are not up to your standards. I will try to improve and include things like how close I was to crapping in my shorts, if it will make you understand the situation better. Especially about the time I realized that my broom was slower than the dragon. Yes, my life flashed before my eyes and I found out that it needs to be longer.

Fortunately, the past couple of days have been nowhere near as dangerous, but still pretty exciting. I played in a dodgespell tournament. I had never heard of it before a couple of days ago. Have you? The team I was on finished third. If the DA exists in the coming year, they should use it to practice, even if I don't come back.

In other news, I just finished my first warding scheme. It was on one of my dodgespell teammate's house. My work was critiqued by my mentor and deemed acceptable. I really wish I had taken Runes instead of Divination. I guess I am now officially an apprentice wardcrafter. You're in Runes. How much do they actually teach you? They actually don't teach it here except in post-secondary classes or through a guild of all things, so most people don't have any skill in Runes.

If you are in need of a good laugh, I helped a jungle troll named Hack with his love life yesterday. No, I am not making this up! Apparently, girl trolls are impressed with boy trolls who can throw a stone farthest into the water. I gave him some pointers on how to throw better and I suspect his dating life will be getting better soon. It almost makes me think that other species have better ideas on dating. Probably would have made my getting a date for the Yule Ball easier.

I have to warn you, my letter writing might be a little sporadic for the next week. I am going to be training really hard. Thundercloud is

bringing some potions that I am supposed to take next week to help me try and become an animagus. That reminds me is it animage or animagus? If you have more than one is it animagi? The downside is that this potion messes with your mind a bit, or so I am told. So please, take anything I write in the coming week with a grain of salt – or better still a 10 kilo bag of salt.

Your wand's story is much more interesting than my wand's story. The important thing about it is that El Dorko Lordo's wand and mine both have phoenix feather cores from the our dear Headmaster's phoenix. When we fought, it created a rarely mentioned brother wand effect.

Well that's all for now. Stay away from the shifty looking squirrels.

Yours,

Harry

You pause to wonder why it took you ten minutes to write the sentence about Karina. For some reason, every time you start thinking about how you were going to write it, it wouldn't come out right. You still don't like how it turned out. Closing the journal and shrinking it again, you place it in your zipper bag along with Bill's warding book. You try apparating back to the beach and this time you find them. Bill and Karina follow you back and he inspects your confundus ward and declares it "Acceptable". He is pretty effing hard to please isn't he? You activate the ward and key it to Karina, so she can control it. Bill also checks your secondary link from the charging ward for the perimeter wards and the shield controller and deems it "Satisfactory". Maybe Hermy Funbags wouldn't be cut out for this. She requires too much positive reinforcement. You're rather pleased with your results, but picture her having a breakdown after being told that her work was simply Acceptable.

The rest of the day is a relaxing enjoyable affair. You say your goodbyes to Fleur although they still have four hours before she has to get to the International Portkey terminal in Sao Paulo - she claims that she needs to 'pack'. Bill offers to help her and says he will meet up with you and the Machados this evening. You get both cheeks kissed, followed by a hug and a quick whisper of 'Take care of



yourself and watch over my William. Never forget that you are already a great wizard.'

Four and a half hours later Bill, returns and all four of you go back to the hotel and Bill is kind enough to show Chico the expedition tent and let him watch cartoons in his room, while you and Karina explore your hotel room.

After some rather intense exploration of the queen sized bed and the shower, you pick up Bill and Chico and head down for a late dinner in the hotel restaurant. Chico liked breakfast better. You feel a little choked up saying your goodbye to Karina. She says that she will miss you for the next two weeks. You watch them portkey away and turn back to Bill, who is looking at you.

"Harry, be careful. Don't get too attached to her. Have some fun, but for Merlin's sake be careful. She doesn't seem like she is having those kind of thoughts right now, but if you keep going back to her one of you might start to get serious about the other. Sex isn't a good thing to build a relationship on and before you say it, my relationship with Fleur goes a lot deeper than just sex. She's my best friend and my lover. She's not wearing my ring yet, but that's because she wants me to help her pick it out of her family vault and I haven't been able to get to France. At your age, I couldn't think past my own dick. Now, that's not to say that you are like me, but it was a long time after my first time before I was ready for anything meaningful. Don't say anything, just think about what I said. You've got a couple of weeks to sort it out. I don't want you to end up like Charlie."

"What happened to Charlie?"

"He proposed to his first girlfriend in his seventh year. I almost think that's why he gave up on quidditch and went to Romania to be a Dragon Handler. He still has a tough time when he is back for Order meetings."

"Charlie's ex is in the Order?" Your mind does a quick inventory of all the Charlie aged females in the Order, there's only a couple possibilities with one prime suspect. "He proposed to Tonks didn't he?"

“Yep and neither of them were ready for it. She wanted her own career and not just to be a quidditch groupie. He said they could make it work and she said that he was deluding himself. I advised him to take it slower, but he went ahead and proposed anyway. After she rejected him, he wanted out of England in a bad way and lost his interest in quidditch. I think he only came back once or twice in all the years before the Triwizard tournament, but once a month he’d come down and see me in Egypt. There are some deep wounds there.”

“Thanks Bill. I’m not you and I’m not Charlie either, but it’s a lot to think about.” The two of you head back to the hotel in relative silence. He tells you to get a good night’s sleep and be ready for the second sight in the morning. You admit to being a bit nervous about the potions you’ll be taking. It takes you a good two hours to fall asleep.

In the morning, the rest of the expedition is waiting for you in the lobby. You head to the back alley so Bill can activate his portkey to the second expedition site. Kwan stops him. “Who is cook, really?”

“Why do you ask?” Bill asks cautiously, his wand already in hand.

“You kept calling him Harry. My sources tell me Harry Potter is missing from England. People offering lots of money for any information about Harry Potter. He has a little friend named Weasley. If I ask you to take off your bandana, would I find a scar there?”

“It’s a distinct possibility.” You answer. There’s a bit of tension in this alley.

“Sanchez, you owe me ten galleons. I told you it was him.” Kwan’s curt laughter cuts through the air of tension. Everyone relaxes a bit.

Harry is also technically your employer as it is his money funding this expedition.” Bill says cautiously. “For all intents and purposes, he is Phoenix Expeditions. Your contracts are binding to him as well as me. His identity is also considered part of your Non Disclosure Agreement. I take it none of you made any speculative slips of the tongue? Does anyone have a problem with this?”

"It complicates things. There's a mighty big bounty on your head, there Mr. Potter." Collins says. "How many know you are here?"

"Me, Bill and one other. Another person has an idea that I am in South America, but not where. Everyone else is turning England upside down looking for me. They think I am hiding among the normals."

"I gotta invoke the complications clause of the contract. I'm going to want more at least twenty five percent more money, if word reaches the wrong ears that you are here, we'll have to fight our way out of this backward country."

Bill looks at Collins. "The extra money isn't a problem if you agree to help train him."

"Done."

"Anyone else?" Bill looks at the remaining trio.

"I will take your raise also." Thundercloud answers. "In return, I will offer an oath of protection when we go to my people next week. I do not need the money so much as my children and grandchildren do. My eldest child grossly mismanaged the family fortunes, which required that I leave my comfortable retirement. I am only here because of them."

Sanchez also takes the raise on the basis of 'increased danger'. Kwan looks at you. "You risked your life for me. I do not require any more money to risk my life for you. My honor demands no less. I will train you. You are still stupid cook. Dark Wizards not stupid like dragons and snakes. I will show you how to fight them." With that agreed on everyone, grasps the Portkey to your next destination.

Five nights later you are sitting at the table trying to clear your head. You barely remember the passing days. This potion is some serious shit. Bill confiscates your wand every day and won't give it back until you answer a series of questions correctly. The end result is that you are only allowed to have your wand about four hours out of the day.

Half of that time you spend setting up the meals and trying to shake the cobwebs out of your head. More than once they had to bind you. The hallucinations aren't always harmless pink bunnies asking McGonagall for a dance. For every Crumple Horned Snorkack you have seen, and you've now seen a few and maybe even turned into one, there have been some very disturbing hallucinations. Too bad you don't have your connection to Mr. Riddle, you might have been able to unhinge him a bit. You had a vision where you were melting and you managed to cast a freezing charm on your hand before Collins stopped you from going further. It took an hour to get the feeling back in that hand.

You've danced with your Mum over the freshly slaughtered bodies of the family Weasley. Dumbledores lemon drop eyes have been gouged out with a spork. Ginny and Hermy Funbags both turned you down in favor of each other before you strangled them. Sanchez turned out to be Tonks trying out a new 'ugly' look. Possibly the most terrifying vision was Karina telling you that Chico actually is your son and that because she forgot to use the contraceptive charm, you're going to be a father again. In one particularly vivid vision this little black skinned boy with only one leg and a red hat hopped around the camp pranking everyone until Bill bribed him to leave with a handful of canary creams from his siblings' stockpiles.

Amazingly enough you found out the next morning that it actually happened. The little guy was a Saci and you actually had polka dots all over your skin for the next two days. Needless to say Bill hasn't let you anywhere near the second site in your state. You've only managed to do one real archer ward in bone and two test ones carved in stone. You triggered one, and it worked nicely. Luna's letters continue to be amusing even on the rereads. Her cryptic answer to your question was "If you manage to become an animage (or is it animagus?), you probably are allowed to call it whatever you want." Is this a conspiracy of some kind? Just for that, you hope you become Harry – The shifty, green-eyed squirrel of doom! Bill has also kept the journal away until you were of mostly sound mind. In hindsight it was a good idea.

Kwan has been teaching you how to spellchain. It is how he wiped the floor with those inferi and held off the corridor full of reptiles.

Spellchaining is best used when you are grossly outnumbered. You repetitively cast spells, whose wand motions flow into the next spell. It won't do much in a duel with Moldy Voldy – El Dorko Lordo was starting to get old, but it does get you used to casting spells quickly. The few sessions you've spent with Collins went well. He showed you a few heavy duty spells. You can now do the firewhip and a couple of real nifty cutters. They are Collins specialty. Kwan seems to favor bludgeoning and banishing his opponents.

You had a distinct moment of clarity the first time you sat down with the two hitwizards after they had learned your true identity.

“So, you guys are really going to show me how to duel?”

“Duel? Kwan, do you duel?”

“No, I think I saw one once. Two men bowing to each other before they start casting spells at each other or something stupid like that.”

“Huh?”

“Stupid cook doesn't understand. We don't duel. We fight! We kill! The only rule in a fight is if you are alive at the end of a fight, then you win. Your Dark Lord is standing in the middle of clearing right there. You are hiding behind a tree. Would you curse him in the back from your hiding spot? Of course you curse him! You keep cursing him until he doesn't move anymore. Now do you want to learn how to duel or to fight?”

“Fight.”

They make you use the pensieve and show the fights from Quirrell all the way to the Department of Mysteries. You are given a scathing critique of your fighting skills. At least you are ‘Stupid, Lucky Cook’ now.

Friday evening comes and Bill is fussing all over you as you prepare to depart for the International Portkey. He stops when you warn him that he is turning into his Mum. Kwan volunteers to come with you to the United States for additional protection. From Sao Paulo, the three

of you take a Portkey to somewhere in Honduras and then to Las Vegas. From Vegas, Thundercloud gets a regional Portkey to the Magical Community in the Black Hills of someplace called South Dakota. You wouldn't have minded a day or two in Las Vegas to take in the sites, but Kwan points out that "sightseeing allows other sightseers to see stupid, lucky cook and sooner or later stupid cook's luck runs out." You get it.

Once you arrive on the last leg of your whirlwind journey, you stop to look at the surroundings. It's beautiful country, much warmer than you expected, but it is summertime. You could picture people fighting for this land. Being borderline delirious, not too much sinks in as Thundercloud introduces 'James Black' to his family of four children, seven grandchildren and three great grandchildren. You barely get through the introductions, before Thundercloud tells you that it is time to go.

Still trying to clear the fuzz out of your mind Thundercloud hustles you into a room and tells you to strip and hands you what can best be described as a loincloth. He begins to draw runes on your torso with clay pots filled with a foul smelling pigment. After a half an hour, you are led down into a sweltering hot chamber with six others participants and about a dozen others all in a crowded room. The two females are allowed a bit more clothing – damn! All of them are looking at you and Thundercloud curiously. You're getting dizzy from the heat and the lack of food and water. For the last thirty-six hours, you've been forbidden from eating anything and only precious little to drink. Brings back memories of the good old cupboard. He at least gives you an explanation.

"Hunger and thirst are primal urges. The ritual is more likely to succeed if you are in touch with primal urges. Considering one of my granddaughters is participating, I'd rather you be focused on them rather than lust."

Sneaking a glance at the one you recognize as Thundercloud's granddaughter, you see that she is a moderately attractive woman in her late teens or early twenties, much more endowed than even Hermy Funbags. As Bill would joke, "A little young for you." Considering a couple of the males are openly looking at her and the

other woman like sides of beef, you don't feel so guilty. She has a pretty smile and very kissable looking lips.

The lightheadedness is really starting to bother you now. How about something to drink, a snack, or both? Some of the others are swaying now, or is it you? The smoke is causing your eyes to water and your nostrils feel like they are on fire. A cup carved out of bone is held to your lips. 'Ah! Finally something liquid.' You gag on the potion. Like just about every other potion, it tastes disgusting. You can almost feel the magic in the air from the chanting witches and wizards. Your voice and the others join in. You have no idea what you are saying.

The last thought that crosses your mind as you collapse is, 'Well, here goes nothing.'

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Authors notes – Yes it is late, but it is the longest chapter in the story so far, with quite a bit occurring. I was pleased by the response to Dodgespell. After covering only 9 days in the previous 9 chapters, it was time to push the calendar forward. The date of the Animagus ceremony is Friday July 26th, 1996. So, there is roughly a month to go to get us back to the events of chapter 1. Let me know what you think.

Jim

Disclaimer – You are Harry Potter, you think. It's hard to focus on facts right now. You're pretty sure that someone with the initials JKR owns the rights to you.

Acknowledgements – All the usual suspects (IP82, ChuckdaTruck, Nukular Winter, Sirius009 and Nonjon) did their part to help shape the plot of this chapter. Beta work by the always rockin FairyQilan.

## Chapter 11 – They're Fast but They're Lazy

The locals call it 'The Descent'. You call it having your humanity stripped from you layer by layer. It is one of the most uncomfortable experiences in your life as your consciousness is detached from control of your body. Quite remarkable, given the number of uncomfortable situations you have found yourself in. You feel hunger in a way that you have never felt before. Thirst becomes an all-consuming need as you thrash on the ground. You crawl towards a dish someone set before you and greedily slurp at the liquid. They continue chanting, but you only manage a growl of hunger, thirst and annoyance. It's too hot. It's too crowded. There's not enough to drink!

One of the few lucid thoughts that cross your mind as you blearily gaze around the room is that Thundercloud was clearly worried about the wrong boy as his granddaughter, 'Walks With Large TaTas and Future Back Pain' is rutting around with one of the other men like an animal in heat. Must try to remember to ask Thundercloud if he is ready to be a Great Granddaddy? It's getting harder to think. You hear words, but they aren't making sense.

"Damn! Thundercloud's English boy is going fast!" Voices whisper in front of you. They must be talking about you. Normally you'd object and not want to be seen as something special or anything, but in this case if going faster will get you an effing bite to eat and some goddammed water, then by all means let's move it along! One of the others moves towards your water dish. You shove him away with your arm territorially. A primal growl of anger emerges from your throat and the whimpering interloper retreats.



“Oh that’ll leave a mark. The boy’s nails are extending. I think he’s starting to get a bit of a muzzle. What do you think? Canine? Feline? Maybe a bear?” The disconnected voices chuckle, you have no clue why. A light clinking sound can be heard. The faint coppery smell of blood reaches your nose. Meat? Meat would be good right now, wouldn’t it? Juicy, tasty meat it would taste so good.

Minutes pass as you continue to lap up the water, desperate to slake your thirst. The heat stifles you. “Can’t tell in this light, but I think I see whiskers. Two sickles on feline. That ain’t no bear.” You don’t care what they are saying or whom they are talking about. You need more water and MEAT!

“Definitely, a cat. Look at the bone structure changing. Better collar him, now. Give me some gauntlets. He ain’t shrinking either. Gonna, be a big kitty cat aren’tcha? Fur’s coming in dark. Some kind of Cougar? Panther?” More clinking noises as rough hands grab at you. You express your displeasure as something slides around your neck. “Easy there boy. No need to get testy. Just so we can follow you. Hey! Look at the patterns on his back in the fur. Is he a leopard?”

You make out Thundercloud’s voice, “Jaguar. He’s a jaguar. Sometimes called a Black Panther.”

“He’s a Jaguar! You’re an Eagle! You know the legends.”

“Yes. I know the legends. They do not matter right now. I think he is almost ready to hunt. We should lead him outside. Are the trackers ready at the other end?”

“Yeah. C’mon boy. Got some nice tasty meat outside for you.” The wonderful smell of meat tantalizes your nostrils.

“Here kitty, kitty.” Something wet slaps on the stone in front of you. You pounce on it and like that, the tiny piece of meat is gone. “Give me more you bastard!” You want to scream. It comes out as wailing noise. Another piece hits the ground, but farther away. You should get up but it is much easier to move, as you follow the man with the plate full of succulent, delicious meat. It’s cooler now and you can smell the outside air. Freedom! You continue to follow the man who

leaves a trail of meat for you. He steps outside the building and disappears leaving your world spinning. You leap forward to get the meat, but it too is gone. The tiny part of you that is still clinging to your humanity recognizes the pull of a Portkey. The man didn't leave, you did. You land on your feet and growl in anger, as you look around the air. Many people hover above you on brooms. They're making noises amongst themselves. You don't care. Perhaps one of them would come just a bit closer?

"No ... meat ... kitty. ... more go get some ... there! Alright drive him ..." Stinging hexes hit your haunches. This time you growl in pain as you leap and snarl at them. They are too high. So you run. You run fast away from the pain. Get to safety. Hard to think!

You make it into the woods and slow down hearing the broom riders circling above you. They aren't hurting you anymore. Smells from the woods fill your senses. A twig snaps under the weight of your front feet. You didn't used to have a foot there did you? You're confused.

"Careful! ...above the tree line. Cats like him can climb. I don't ... ." You used to know what this means. You don't care. Hunger rules your thoughts.

Staying here isn't a good idea. No meat here. You move off into the woods, in search of something. Part of you says run and be free from the meat in the air. You ignore them. They ignore you. You are fast, but stealthy. Stalk your prey quietly. Strike quickly from a close distance. You sniff the wind. There is prey that way. You catch the sent on the light breeze. Your eyes are search the trees and the brush - a flash of brown. You pounce! You miss! The tiny morsel evades you into the brush. It is too thick for you to follow. You want to whine, but noise warns other meat. So you stalk further into the forest in search of more prey. Movement becomes more fluid. Senses sharpen. Before you were noisy and loud. You make much less noise. You smell water. It's not far. You need to drink. Meat needs to drink. Water is a good place to look for meat.

You quicken your pace. Water is close now. A small stream is in front of you. The noise from the running water will hide your approach. You follow the stream, straining to hear the sounds of prey. There! The

moon's light reflects off the moving water and you see a shape. Meat! It is a large prey. It looks fast. It reminds you of something ... someone ... Prongs? You can almost remember, but you can't. This Prongs is meat and you want meat. It drinks from the stream. You will need to chase it. It will try and cross the water. That will slow it.

Prongs looks up and sees you. You stare at Prongs. Prongs stares at you. Prongs knows what you are going to do. You know what you are going to do. Prongs looks away and starts to run back into the forest away from the water. You leap after him. The footing by the water is bad, but you are better suited for slippery footing. Meat charges through the brush. You chase knowing that it is slowing the meat more than it is slowing you. You leap at the meat and swipe the hind legs. Your weight knocks it to the ground. It struggles to stand and run, but you pounce fully on it's back and sink your teeth into the base of the neck.

You avoid the prongs as it thrashes and the sweet taste of meat trickles down your throat. Prongs stops thrashing. You can enjoy your meat now. Greedily, you tear at the hide covering the meaty flesh on it's side. The taste. The meat is good! You eat until you again feel the sting in you backside. The flying meat has returned. They are hurting you again. You snarl at them. This is your meat! Not theirs! More pain. It drives you from your kill. Your kill rises and floats up to flying meat. It is confusing. The meat was dead and now it moves again. You don't understand. You flee from the pain and confusion. You want to kill the flying meat. They stole from you. You run into the night and circle back to the stream. Thirst! Water after meat is good. You taste the stream. You smell blood, but that leads you back to where your meat was stolen. Go back to the stream. Follow the stream and look for more meat.

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Hours later you are stalking smaller meat. The meat is moving through the brush. You don't want to lose it like first meat or have it stolen like other meat. You are prepared to pounce when you are flung through the air. This happened before didn't it? You hit the ground and try to run, but the flying meat and their swirls of light stop

you. You can't move. Flying meat is there riding their big sticks and pointing their little sticks at you.

"Ready ... br... out...." Meat makes no sense. Let go! Want to run free! You feel something happening. Something different. It feels wrong. Four feet feel right. This feels not right. Vision is blurry. Something, everything wrong.

"...keep ...petri...til...stands something."

'No! Release me or suffer!' You want to hiss and snarl but you can't. Still pertri... petri ... frozen.

"C'mon back. ...on my voice. That's it focus. You can hear me. Blink twice if you can understand me." The voice sounds familiar. You try to follow it. Thoughts flowing together like mud. Who are you? What are you? Meat is still saying something. Concen... Concen... Concentrate! Focus! Clear your mind! Who used to say that to you? Greasy meat! Greasy git! The Snake man! No Snape, Severus Snape. That's it, remember the Snape. Bezoar from a goat's stomach. Potter! Five points from Gryffindor for breathing. Snivellus! They called him Snivellus in school.

"He's coming around. How many fingers am I holding up? Blink and tell me how many." You blink two times. Wait does the thumb count? You blink three times. "Oops confused him with my thumb. Damn. Always do that. We're going to keep you in a body bind for five more minutes. Try to remember your name. How old you are. The first spell you ever cast."

Spells? You cast spells? You try to say something, but still your lips won't move. It must be one of those spell things. Someone once told you magic wasn't real. He was fat and didn't chew with his mouth closed. His name was Shithead. No, that's not right. His name was Vernon. He lied to you. Magic does exist. An even larger man who smelled like stale cheese showed you. He took you to a place to buy things. You have a wand! Your wand is holly and phoenix feather. You can fly a broom just like the flying meat – err men.

Body bind, it's why you can't move. Per... Petrificus Totalus. Whip wand forward, jab directly at target and incant spell. You remember a girl using it on a boy, who was trying to stop you from going somewhere. Neville! Neville Longbottom. He likes plants. You know him. You're a wizard. Your names Harry Black! No, it's James Potter! No that's Prongs! Wait Prongs? Prongs was in the forest. That wasn't Prongs. Prongs died a long time ago. You're Harry Potter. You're pretending to be James Black. There's a crazy Korean hitwizard, a troll with girl problems, a naked veela and a boy named Chico. Wait go back to the naked veela for a minute. That was nice. This is the United States. Thundercloud brought you here. He's going to show you how to be an animage. No, that's not right – or is it? You're an animagus! Holy shit! You're an animagus! Take that, you miserable Hogwart's fucks!

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Five minutes later they set you free. For the last two minutes, you've been waiting to throw up. There's half a deer's raw heart in your stomach. The nausea is overpowering. You puke like Seamus after a Hogsmeade weekend. He's usually so plastered he can't stand up by the time he gets into the tower. Poor Dean ends up dragging him back into the common room. He's already an alcoholic, damn lush!

All things considered, it's nasty – very nasty. You continue to empty your stomach. Apparently you had quite a bit to eat. What a mind numbing experience! It was all so primitive.

"Here. Lets get you cleaned up." Thundercloud hands you a towel and helps you to your feet. There are three others standing around you. One of them floats the mess you just created into a bowl. The carcass of the deer you killed sits next to a workbench.

"Do you want a potion?" You violently shake your head no, not trusting your raw throat or your ability to form a whole sentence.

"Here are your glasses." Thundercloud hands you your glasses back. Something is wrong. It's all blurry. You take the cursebreaker glasses off and look. You're visions changed. Things aren't as blurry as they used to be.

“Glasses not right,” you mutter. You sound like Hack. Hey! You remember Hack. You’re almost back to normal – well normal for you that is.

“The change can do that. The longer you spend in your jaguar form, the more it will correct your vision. In a few weeks you will see like a normal person, or at least your prescription will be very weak. One of my daughters is married to an optometrist. I will ask him to nullify the vision charm on these until your sight stabilizes. Even at my age, my vision remains as sharp as ever.” That’s what you are, a jaguar! The cat, not the cool sports car.

“Should I change again?”

“No. First we will make your totem. The magic you bind to the totem will strengthen the connection between you and your animal. The totem will allow your animal senses and strength to crossover into your human form. In simplest terms, you have a human form and an animal form. You are both and more than both at the same time. Start thinking about it like that.” You remember Thunderclouds totem. Yes, you want one of those. He leads you to a bench set out in this open area. You consciously stay away from the bowl containing your vomit and choke back a bit of bile in your throat.

“What do I do?”

“Take another bowl and this stone file. Use the file on the antlers and collect the shavings. The blood, meat and antler shavings capture the essence of your kill. Once you feel you have enough bone shavings, we will move to the piece of holly I have and I will show you the shaping spell to create the totem carving. Take your time, James. Call for me when you are done.”

He starts to leave, but you stop him. “Did your granddaughter find her form?”

“Starless Sky succeeded in becoming a falcon. The spirits of flight run strong in my bloodline. I am very proud of her. Only two of the others succeeded. One of them never succeeds. This is his eighth time. It is

possible he is becoming addicted to the cleansing potions, but the elders do not have the heart to refuse his requests to participate. The other two became a bison and a llama or alpaca. They are still trying to figure out which. They thought you were initially a leopard or a cougar, but you are a jaguar.” Something stirs in your memories from last night. It’s on the tip of your tongue, but you can’t quite remember it.

As he walks away, you are vaguely aware of the other three staring at you. It’s annoying. You set to work with the file and the bowl, let’s try not to think about what’s in the other bowl shall we? After ten minutes of collecting shavings, you feel like it is enough and call the eagle animagus back over to you. He starts showing you the shaping spell.

“Why are the other’s staring at me?” You practice the intricate wand movements he just demonstrated.

“There hasn’t been a jaguar animagus in over two hundred years. The jaguar is the ultimate predator in the Americas. Everything else is prey to it. There is also the matter of certain legends surrounding our forms.”

You stop what you are doing and look at the old man next to you. There’s a feeling of dread in your stomach, like right after your name was called for the tournament. “What legends?”

“The jaguar and the eagle were the two most powerful tribes of the great Mayan empire, founded in part by the survivors of the Atlantis cataclysm. The clans fought for dominance and control of the land long before it was even called the Americas. As the empire collapsed, it was said that during times of strife and hardship the jaguar would return. The jaguar knights of the Aztec empire were fierce warrior mages, who were feared during their reign. Each time there has been a period of darkness, there has been one or more jaguars. The last two were the source of the darkness and were difficult to vanquish. Your presence is not seen as a good omen.”

“Am I about to be hexed out of town?”

“No. Specifically there are myths that speak of the jaguar sired by the ancient eagle and a great war that will be. The elders are wary of myths and legends. The younger generations do not put as much stock in these things. They reject our culture and seek lives for themselves away from our traditional lands.”

“Do you have a record of this legend?” Are legends like prophecies? You hate prophecies. Damn things follow you around like the plague, don’t they?

“No. It is a verbal tradition passed down through history. The seer who supposedly originated the stories lived six hundred years ago. The exact wording does not exist anymore. Most are skeptical, but your appearance has unsettled things. People fear change. Live to my age and you will have seen too much change to remember. ”

“Do we at least win?”

“In a war, no one ever wins. Since the exact wording is gone no one really knows for certain. Some doubt that any prophecy was ever actually made and merely concocted during the rise of one of the Dark Wizards, who had that form.”

“Damn!” No other words come to mind. Actually several words come to mind, but it probably wouldn’t do to be seen cursing like a sailor in front of people who are already wary of you.

“You have already fought the darkness before. You are fighting the coming darkness now. This should be nothing new for you. The English call you their ‘chosen one’. If I may borrow from our good friend Mr. Kwan – ‘Quit whining like stupid cook!’” You bristle under his harsh whispers.

“Doesn’t make it any easier,” you shoot back angrily. Your first attempt at the shaping spell fails miserably. It is more glob than jaguar. Thundercloud sighs and pulls out another block of wood.

“On the contrary, your animal spirit is a representation of you. You embody the ultimate predator. Your reflexes will grow quicker. Your senses will sharpen. Your strength will increase. When you are finally



at peace with the spirit that dwells within, those who would cross wands with you will wish they hadn't."

Nice pep talk. "What do you mean? When I'm at peace with the spirit." The second attempt has a bit more definition. It is a glob with four legs and a tail now.

"It will take time for you to learn to control yourself. As you can see from your attempts, when you perform a spell, it hardly ever works on the first time, does it? You learn through repetition to control the flow of magic through your body. By becoming your animal, you introduce a brand new magic into your entire being. Your sense of perception is different. Control is a word for the Europeans. They seek to suppress the animal instincts by their perversions of the change. It cheats them of the full benefits of having an animal instinct. You do not want to control your animal. You should strive to make an agreement with the animal within you. When the two forces coexist inside you instead of fighting for dominance, then you will know the true power at your disposal."

It makes sense, but it also makes you worried. People have always accused you of being a moody, emotional person or brat – depending on whom you talk to. You don't like the idea of not being in control. "How long before I make peace with my animal spirit?" Another block of holly is sacrificed in the name of higher education.

"Days? Weeks? Months? Years? That is for you to decide. I will show you meditation techniques. They are also useful for the Occulmency you wish to learn. You will spend at least an hour a day in your form. I will supervise you and we will trade your collar for a wristband so that you can be tracked, if your animal spirit decides to take a journey into the countryside. Now let us return to destroying another piece of holly. You need to relax and forget this anxiety that possesses you. You learn quickly. I am certain you will learn this just as quickly. Now focus on your animal. See it in your mind's eye. Breathe deeply and cast the spell."

It still takes two more times, but don't they say that the fifth time is the charm? In your hand you now hold a miniature jaguar. Its mouth is

open in silent roar and its right front foreleg is slightly raised with tiny claws extended. It feels right, doesn't it?

"This is it," you say, proud of your work.

"Indeed it is. Now, for the next part we will soak it in a mixture of your blood, the blood of your kill and the sap from the holly tree. The totem will soak through the night. Tomorrow, we will coat it in the shavings of the antlers, wrap it in the heart meat and cook the meat over a magical flame. I will assist you with the spellwork. It is my role as the one that 'sired' you. Shaping is the most complex part. Everything else is rather mundane. A cord from the hide and sinew will be made for you to wear it around your neck." A knife opens a wound in your palm and you drip your blood into a bowl.

"Sounds good to me. When can we get something to eat? Preferably cooked." You say eliciting a chuckle from the old man. Using a simple healing spell you close the gash on your palm.

He leads you off towards his home. There seems to be a picnic or some kind of celebration in progress. They must be celebrating Starless Sky's success. You see Kwan sitting in a corner by himself. You load up a paper plate and excuse yourself as several people converge on Lone Thundercloud.

The Korean hitwizard idly eats a roast beef sandwich absolutely slathered in mustard. "You make quite a stir with these people. They are talking about signs of darkness and bad omens. Even when you try to hide, you still get noticed. Learn from your animal. It is supposed to be quiet and stealthy. Otherwise, you are stupid dead kitty cook, whose luck finally ran out."

Well it's about as close to a compliment as you are going to get, so might as well role with it. Maybe someone would be kind enough to carve that on your tombstone. Kwan seems to know a lot about being an animagus. "Are you an animagus?"

Kwan shakes his head no and returns to his food. You have no problem eating in silence. You practically inhale the first plate of food. The roast seemed a bit overdone, but it didn't look it. That starts you

thinking that you might start preferring meat that isn't cooked as much. It's worth asking Thundercloud about later.

"I'm going back for a second plate. Want anything?" Kwan continues chewing and points at a can next to his plate, the can's label says 'Milwaukee's Best'.

You approach the tables with the food laid out. Starless Sky and the other female from the ceremony are both there. They both smile at you.

"Hello," you say cautiously.

"How was your hunt last night, Mr. Black?" Sky asks.

"Confusing. Very confusing. I killed a deer. Call me James." Yes, that about covers it. "How about yours?"

"Nothing nearly as impressive. A small squirrel was my first kill." You wonder if it was related to the one that terrorized Luna.

"At least you didn't end up spewing grass everywhere after you changed back!" Her friend mutters indignantly. She's wearing a shirt that says 'I Love Alpacas'. I guess they answered the question. She sees you staring at her shirt. "My father portkeyed to a farm in Colorado and bought 10 of these. They seem to be enjoying themselves. It's all one big joke to them." You notice that roughly a third of the people in attendance are sporting the same shirt."

"Oh hush Michelle, it's an interesting animal. It is sturdy, hardworking, tireless and you can make your own wool. How cool is that?"

"I am seriously going to hurt you Lauren, keep it up birdbrain." You thought her name was Starless Sky. She turns back to you.

"So, everybody is all in a state about you being a jaguar?"

"Your grandfather has been filling me in. People seem to be staring at me wherever I go today." You answer scooping another helping of coleslaw onto your plate.

“Well it’s not like an omen of doom and gloom drops out of the sky everyday. Wait a minute! This is South Dakota! Every day is a disaster.” She answers melodramatically.

“Don’t mind her. Lauren misses the hustle and bustle of the east coast. You ever hear back on that astronomy apprenticeship at New Salem?” Lauren shakes her head no and makes a symbolic ‘crossing the fingers’ gesture.

“You two went to New Salem?” You finish filling your plate and grab the same kind of can that Kwan indicated earlier.

“That’s us – the two rebels forsaking our heritage, using different names, and going off to the white man’s school! Did you go to Hogwarts then?”

“Yeah. Not as much fun as I hoped. It’s in my past now.” You sincerely hope so.

“So did you know that Harry Potter boy?” How quickly the topic grows annoying.

You don’t even miss a beat. “Not really. He didn’t really have many close friends.” You have even less now, but that’s beside the point.

“Why don’t you sit with us? Us animagi have to stick together. It’s the rules.”

“Let me give this to my friend first. Is it really animagi? No one will give me a straight answer on whether it is animage or animagus? I wasn’t sure if you have more than one in a group whether it is animagi or animaguses?”

For some reason this causes both women to start laughing. “You mean you don’t know?” Gah! This is getting really old. You head over and give Kwan his can. He arches an eyebrow as you head back to the table where Michelle and Lauren are chatting.

“So which is it?” It’s time to put an end to this once and for all – alpaca girl answers.

“What were we talking about again, oh harbinger of doom?”

“Nevermind. Thanks for nothing.”

You sit down and chat with the two women, who act more like girls. They are both twenty, have been out of New Salem for three years. Michelle likes potion brewing and works in a herbology greenhouse sorting potion ingredients. Lauren is an assistant teacher of astronomy at the local school on the reservation, who hopes to head back east to ‘civilization’. You get the impression that neither of them really care for the magical South Dakota lifestyle. Based on early evidence, Astronomy must be a field for attractive women. They are more in touch with the muggle, err normal world. They asked you if you were glad that Ross and Rachel finally got together, only to be shocked that you have never seen or heard of Friends before. The other big topic of discussion was that while you were out metaphorically killing your pappy, somebody detonated a bomb at the Atlanta Olympics. You picture the little ferret going, ‘Muggles killing Muggles what a wonderful idea! Do you have pictures?’

In the meantime, you have lied about graduating, NEWT scores, and having never playing quiddicth. You don’t lie about your new interest in ward crafting and ancient runes. That sparks some interest in runes from Lauren, but not Michelle. You can hold a competent discussion and even go so far as to discuss your recent warding scheme.

“So how many people have approached you?” Michelle asks changing the subject.

“Huh?”

“You know, ‘strengthening the line’ and all that? If you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to. I know two cousins and even one of my aunt’s were talking about it earlier.”

“I seriously have no idea what you are talking about.” This is one of those suspiciously uncomfortable moments. You are waiting for the answer, it is probably not going to be pleasant.

Lauren looks at you, “You mean no ones approached you or you really don’t know what we are talking about?”

“Uh, yes to both questions. I’ve been with your grandfather all morning. Would you mind explaining what you are talking about?”

“Um, sure. When a male outsider is brought in for the ritual they may get several propositions from families if they succeed in becoming an animagus. Since you succeeded and have the distinction of being the first jaguar in recent history, we figured you’d be beating them off with a stick. Hell, even if you aren’t successful, they might still approach you. I think I heard that the Asian man with you hexed a pair of women who propositioned him.”

Somehow you manage to squeak out a reply through the lump in your throat. You really hope this isn’t going where you think it is. “What kind of propositions are you talking about?”

“Reproductive ones.” Oh dear, it went where you thought it was headed. So that’s what they meant by ‘strengthening the line’. Yeah, Kwan would have hexed them. You wonder what curse he used? He likes Crucio?

“Hey look Lauren, he just turned white as a ghost.”

“I’m not really into arranged marriages and such,” you stammer out a reply.

“Whoa slow down there, black cat! No one said anything about that. A proposition is just to father a child and add your blood and power to the line. Do you English folks still do that arranged marriage crap?”

“Some of the purebloods do.” Why is it that the supreme predator of the Americas suddenly feels like prey?

"We call them inbreds here. No, James a proposition is all about the families looking for powerful wizards to father children for them. There isn't even any responsibility on their part after the fact. I think it is disgusting, but the elders condone it based on maintaining our culture." You almost choke on the drink you just took.

You sincerely hope they are putting one over on you, but you get the feeling they aren't. "I don't have to, do I?" You have bad memories of magically binding contracts that you never signed up for.

"Of course you do."

"Michelle! Quit! You are scaring him. James, you can refuse every proposition that comes your way. You are under no obligation unless you and grandfather agreed to one beforehand. The practice is barbaric! Like influx of fresh blood is going to reinvigorate this stagnate culture." Maybe she's still dealing with her own transformation or maybe she is just a very angry young woman. Her outburst draws a few dirty looks from nearby tables.

"Easy there, Starless." Lauren seems to huff at the use of that name. What is it with women and not wanting to be called certain names? You would think going into Astronomy that she would want to be called Professor Sky. Then there is the auror, who must not be named. You only really ever objected to being called a worthless freak, Scarhead, Potty, the Heir of Slytherin, or an insolent attention seeking arrogant brat. None of them are your given name, so all your objections are completely valid.

"Why would a woman even want to do something like that?"

"James, we've been asking ourselves that for years. Some do it for the financial support, others for the notoriety, and some actually buy that whole duty to family and tribe to make ourselves stronger."

You consciously avoid the topic of propositions for the next five minutes until, you see Thundercloud with several females around him he looks slightly angry.

Michele looks up. "Looks like they are asking Lauren's grandfather for permission to approach you."

"Why?" You seem to be asking that question more and more these days. People never used to give you answers. You are getting answers these days, just not precisely the ones you want to hear.

"He sponsored you. 'Sired' sounds like something vampires do. Therefore, his family gets first crack at you. Anything else is considered impolite." As if walking up to a bloke and asking him to knock up their daughter wasn't? Your once ravenous appetite is now gone and the world swallowing you whole wouldn't be such a bad idea. Perhaps Thundercloud could have mentioned these things to you last week, or any other time before that.

There have been many humiliating points in your life. Most of your early adolescence involved Dudley doing something like pulling his old pants down in public. It wouldn't have been that shameful had Dudder's old pants not been around your waist on these occasions. The whole Heir of Slytherin business ranks up there in the top five definitely. As does working up the nerve to ask Cho out and being rejected. The old number one used to be having been tricked into helping to get your godfather killed by El Dorko Sheep Fucker himself! The new number one is – having small groups of females, sometimes escorted by their mothers, fathers, and even grandparents approach you and discuss the possibilities of sexual intercourse for the express purpose of child production between you and the aforementioned females. Michelle and Lauren have long since departed not wanting to see the 'procession of flesh' as Lauren referred to it. You'd leave too if you had anywhere to go. You notice that Kwan has moved closer to you and has an unreadable expression on his face. If possible, he likes this even less than you do – which is really saying something. After the fourth group is turned away. Thundercloud loudly announces that you have to rest in preparation for the remainder of the ceremony and hustles you inside.

"Forgive me. I stopped attending the animagus rituals two decades ago, when I first retired. I did not realize how the times have changed and that certain ideas, which were once meditated over during the course of several days, were now acted on like a simple business



transaction with all the thought that would be given to trading horseflesh. We will depart as soon as we finish your totem.”

“I don’t even know what to say at this point.” It’s true. You’re pretty much stunned.

“Our society was never very large, even before the white man came to this land. Initially we stood by our kinsmen and resisted the intruders. The battles that were fought in the years before my birth took a great toll on our people. European magic had a definite advantage in savagery. It had more structure and organization. There are only two other tribal schools still in operation in North America. Different tribes chose different methods of trying to strengthen the line. Some still foolishly believe that we can rise and cast the white man out. These notions and fears were a driving force behind these propositions to look for other magical people to add their magic to our bloodlines. I had hoped we would depart before this got out of hand, but with the younger generations beginning to reject our culture they seem a bit more desperate than I had ever imagined.”

Kwan slips in behind you. “Finished with stupid people bothering you to make babies for them?”

“Yes, heard they were after you too?”

“Those two not want to make babies anytime soon.” Kwan has a very menacing smile on his face. There was a time in your life where someone like Pince, Pomfrey or McGonagall could scare you when you were in their domain. Not anymore! You know what scary looks like and it looks like Kwan! Collins is a thug, but Kwan is just plain scary.

“Do I want to know what you did to them?”

“I show you sometime,” the hitwizard chuckles and smiles at you.

Thundercloud’s home bares no real resemblance to the Weasley home that will no longer be named. It is large, but clean and modestly decorated. Thundercloud has a master bedroom on the first floor. Currently, two of his daughters, a son-in-law, a grandson and two

granddaughters including Lauren Starless Sky dwell here. You and Kwan have been given individual rooms and no one is bugging you to go degnome a fucking garden! When you mention the topic of degnoming to Lauren's mother, she looks horrified.

"Gnomes are filthy vermin and carry all sorts of diseases! Their tunnels cause sinkholes for livestock! We kill garden gnomes around here. Don't you?" Trees Bending in the Wind answers. She's nice, polite, and refined preferring that you call her simply Wind and lacks any notions of smothering you with affection or stuffing you with food until you burst. She also doesn't seem to be interested in asking you to stuff either of her two daughters. It's nice to be treated cordially in someone else's home. Quite a refreshing change from the norm isn't it? She reminds you of how your aunt would treat guests in her home, although Wind seems to have a genuine sincerity about her – not some fake smile plastered on her face!

After a brief rest Thundercloud summons both you and Lauren into his study and has Lauren demonstrate the meditation techniques to you. She is mildly shocked that you do not know them already. He locks the door with a spell and walks Lauren through her transformation again. You watch in mild fascination as she changes into a falcon. Thundercloud dons a thick leather glove and coaxes his granddaughter onto his arm. During this time he keeps talking to her in an even tone. He asks her to perform a few actions. At first she raises one wing when he directs her and nods twice when asked, but soon she stops responding and begins to look agitated. He sets her on a couch and lets her fuss about the room for a time with his wand out.

"If she makes a hostile move towards you, do not hesitate to stun her. For a brief moment she stayed cognizant of what was going on, but her animal took over. You will experience this as well. Eventually, the moments of clarity will grow longer."

After ten more minutes, he asks you to immobilize her. One quick body bind later and the falcon perched on top of the couch is glaring at you with beady little eyes. You float her gently to the floor and Thundercloud shows you the same spell Sirius and Remus used to force Peter out of his animagus form. On a side note, why in the hell

were you never shown that? It's not like the bad guys have at least one animagus among them! Stupid sodding bastards! After demonstrating for him a dozen times under his watchful eye, he allows you to cast the spell and Lauren returns to her normal form. You see the same wild looks of confusion in her eyes. Her grandfather begins to talk to her in that same steady voice asking her about star constellations and comet periodicity. Every minute or so, he asks her to blink her eyes to either answer a true/false question or blink for a number of siblings, aunts or cousins. It takes three minutes before she starts actually answering the questions. At the six minute mark, he asks her how much she is enjoying living in South Dakota and she simply rolls her eyes at him. He laughs and releases her from your body bind.

"Thank you granddaughter. Would you be so kind as to ask Mr. Kwan to come here? I would rather have an extra wand in the room when Mr. Black makes his second transformation."

"Maybe, we should go outside? This room is pretty big, but I don't know how long I will be able to think clearly?" You are worried about mauling the old man. If you managed to get to Kwan, the little fucker deserves it.

"No, we will be fine in here. I will conjure a plate of fresh meat."

"Conjured food doesn't last, does it?"

"Ah but after a minute or two you won't realize that, will you? Besides, it would be expensive to feed you the real thing and you would get all fat and lazy. Eventually, I will conjure small animals for you to stalk when we return to the expedition. Now relax and clear your mind. You will need to begin focusing on your form, just like my granddaughter."

It makes sense. Lauren returns with Kwan, as you sit in the middle of the room and try to relax. Some of the others want in, but Thundercloud turns them away. You let your breathing slow and try to recapture some of the sensations of the last night. It almost feels like your body does one giant shrug as you roll your shoulders forward. It's a strange sensation.

“Can you lift your right paw?” Paw? Damn, you changed already. That was it? You missed it! Oh yeah, he wanted you to do something what was it? Right Paw! You lift your right paw. In the right light you can see your spots under the dark fur.

“Very good. Do you want a piece of meat?” You start to shake your head. It’s not meat. You know that. Wait! It smells like meat. No! It’s conj... con... fake meat. Meat not right! Why is meat not right? Smell like meat. Look like meat. Man give meat. Tasty meat. You pad around the room and sniff. Old man gives you more meat. You like old meat man. Two others not giving you meat, ignore. Room smells like birds. Birds fun to chase. Old meat man keeps making sounds, you don’t understand. No meat man make noises. You don’t like his growls and you snarl at him. Female smells like flowers. A spot by the window is warm with heat coming from light. You curl up in spot as man throws more meat to you. You see bird. Can’t smell bird, but you see bird. Want to chase bird. Meat make noises. Want to jump and pounce on the bird. Leap and pounce. Hit something before bird. Bird flying away. No! Stuck! Can’t move. Can’t chase bird.

“... why ... dows ... perturbable...” Old meat says.

“Stu ... ity ... dows!” Other male meat makes strange noise. Head hurt.

“... touch ... fur ...” Female meat walks towards you. You want to growl a warning, but can’t. Stay away. Female meat touches you. Want to swat away. Can’t move! Leave alone!

Bright light! Changing! Meat saying things again. Run away. Lights bad! Can’t move. Don’t want to listen to meat! Chase meat! Kill meat! No listen to meat!

Still talking. Saying words. You know words. Words mean something. Blink? What is blink? What is Bill? Bill! You know Bill. He has red fur. He has idiot family. He has pretty flower. No he has pretty Fleur. Fleur in France. You see England. You see France. You see Fleur with no underpants. He’s asking you more questions. He’s making more sense now. Words mean something. Two plus two, four blinks. Six divided by three, four blinks. No! Three, two blinks. Two blinks!

Gradually, your thoughts clear as you come to. You remember where you are and why you are here and who Thundercloud is. There's a strange sensation in your stomach. The conjured meat just vanished. That must be it. You still feel groggy as you answer their questions.

Four hours later, Thundercloud and Kwan send you upstairs. All said and done, you spent an hour in your form, two hours meditating and the last hour either blearily coming out of your transformation or talking with Thundercloud about the sensations you experienced. According to them your best effort you were able to respond to three things before you lost your clarity. Lauren did that on her first try! Then again, you are playing catchup on this whole meditation thing. It would be nice to be ahead of the game for a change wouldn't it? Since it ain't happening anytime soon, you grab a shower and decide to turn in. Your meditating technique also leaves a bit to be desired. Your thoughts kept drifting back to a certain busty lady stroking your – fur. You didn't like it at the time, but in retrospect it felt nice. Best make that a nice cold shower, idiot!

You come out of the shower and go into your room. Your head hurts from your changing eyesight. Things look a little clearer, but not by much. It was tempting to ask for a pain potion, but Thundercloud said no pain potions for at least a week to give your body time to adjust to the change. Oddly, both he and Kwan agree that pain is a good thing for you – the sick bastards! Your hand dips to your wand. Someone is in your room! You note that your night vision is improving as well. It's Lauren. She's sitting on your bed.

"This is my room isn't it?" It's been a rough day, but you're not that out of it are you?

"Yes it is. I can't believe that I am doing this, but here goes. James Black, I would like to proposition you." You'd honestly like to think that you weren't expecting that, but the moment you saw her that thought went through your mind. Shocking how jaded you've become in a few short weeks isn't it? Oh, better answer the woman before she gets angry.

"I thought you considered this whole thing barbaric?" You whisper trying not to let your voice rise.

"Silencing charm. We don't have to whisper. Yes, I'm a rebel to a point. Before you ask, I did meditate on this. Several times in fact. I have my reasons. I'm surprised that grandfather kept you down there so long." She had left two hours ago after her second transformation.

"Well, we'll be out in the jungle again Monday night. I need to improve and get control quickly." You say trying to steer clear of the earlier topic.

"Clarity, James. Never control. Don't strive for control, rather try to understand." She says in a serious tone. You take a moment to consider her. She is modestly attractive with that large chest taunting you in a loose and rather revealing robe. She is only about five feet and four inches, which only serves to make her breasts look even more exaggerated. A brief memory of her in the firelight tearing her top off and diving into the arms of another man flashes across your mind. She sees what you are doing and licks her lips in anticipation. A subtle shift in her sitting position allows the robe to open even further. You swallow hard. In the dim light of the moon coming in through the window, it looks very inviting. Robes like that should be illegal. On second thought they should required.

"So what about my idea, James? Does it interest you?" Her voice has a sudden throaty quality to it.

You almost want to growl in reply. She wants to mate! She's in heat. Take her! You start towards her and stop as she rises to meet you. "No. This isn't right. Neither of us has con... sorry, clarity yet. This might just be you wanting to act on your new impulses. Merlin knows I was just about to!" Still might – if she doesn't hurry up and close that robe. Thank the powers that be for teenaged embarrassment!

She looks upset and confused at the same time. "I...", she starts but stops uncertain of what to say.

You seize the initiative and step back a few steps from her. "No. This is a bad idea. If we did this, I'd just walk away and you'd have a child

on your hands. You need to get your own clarity first. If I come back this way and you still want to – ask me then and I'll give you an answer. This, this would just be wrong.” You don't want to see her end up just like Karina – flat on her back screaming your name in an effort to test the silencing charm? No, you don't want her to be a single mother who got in over her head because of a snap decision.

She looks lost in thought, maybe lust for a moment and then pulls her robe fully closed, damn – err good. “I guess you're right. I'm sorry if I offended you.”

“There is no conceivable way you could offend me! I'll be cursing myself for being an idiot not ten seconds after you go out that door.” You say getting a bit of a smile out of her.

“That long?”

“Kwan says I'm kind of slow. Stupid is the word he uses most of the time.” He occasionally uses the word Crucio, but that is neither here nor there. “We could still do it without the baby making part.” You try to sound casual without sounding either desperate or like a child.

She laughs at you and starts towards the door, stopping just in front of you. “Sorry James, I took a fertility potion. For the next week prevention spells won't work. For the record, I think you are very smart for a seventeen year old. Promise me one thing?” You're not the first bloke to lie about your age now are you? Plus it fit the cover story. You were just following orders, well recommendations, oh okay, so it was your idea.

“What's that?”

“That you'll make at least one more trip back here to give me a chance to ask you again.” She pulls your head down to hers and gives you a brief nuzzling kiss on the lips, then she grabs your rump. “Yum. I like them nice and firm.” The only thing you can do is nod stupidly as she walks out and closes the door behind her, swishing her own nice and firm rump all the way. Shit! The train has left the station and all you can do is stare at the caboose!

You were wrong. It was only five seconds after she left you started cursing yourself and this newfound sense of maturity. In this case the difference between right and easy is a set of 'blue balls'.

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In the morning, Lauren corners you looking like she had barely slept. She pulls you back into your room. "Thank you for stopping me. You were right. I don't know what I was thinking. You are a true gentleman."

You smile at her. "No, I was scared witless. It still gives me the woolies. I'm a teenager, definitely not a gentleman. I was all for the idea of casual sex with you. If you can keep a secret, I'm pretty sure I still am. Baby making is another thing all together. I'm still trying to figure out who I want to be, but I don't think I want to be a guy who just jumps into a situation like that and leaves."

She pulls you into a massive hug against those gianormous breasts – no it isn't a word but it should be! After about ten seconds you are let go wondering about what kind of guy you wouldn't mind being for the next twenty or so minutes. Stupid fertility potions! Thundercloud would wonder where you were anyway. The two of you head downstairs and get some breakfast while discussing the totem process that is left to complete.

He leads you to a workbench set up under a tarp. The other three successful animagi/animagusus arrive with their sponsors and start working on their totems. Michelle arrived with Lauren, there heads bent in a rapid exchange of hushed whispers. The alpaca animagus is now looking back and forth between the two of you and smirking. You blush and stop meeting her gazes. You'd hex her if you thought you could get away with it, effing herd animal!

"Am I to assume from all the non verbal communication going on that something happened between you and my granddaughter last night, Harry?" The old man asks quietly.

"No, sir. She propositioned me, but I talked her out of it. I don't think either of us have the necessary clarity to make that kind of choice



and it would be a poor way for me to repay you and your family for bringing me into your home and teaching me all this. She also doesn't know who I really am and what I am up against." You know that Ron would have knocked her up and left in a heartbeat.

He looks you over with his enhanced eyes boring into you. "You did well. My granddaughter has always been rebellious child. It was surprising that she even decided to pursue the ritual of release. She has been experiencing a swell of support and acceptance from the family. I think it was the craving for support and acceptance was behind her sudden interest in propositioning you. Perhaps there is hope for your people yet. Though making such broad judgments based solely on your actions will most likely lead me to disappointment."

"I don't know. If you listen to Kwan, I'm a stupid cook who somehow keeps saving myself from my own stupidity. Did you ever notice that every fifth word out of his mouth is stupid?" Whoa, time to check the old internal monologue! You said that last sentence out loud.

"Indeed I have. Continue coating the totem and then apply the antler shavings. I believe I will stretch my legs." Thundercloud walks off as you use a horsehair brush to apply the thickened blood, sap, blood, and vomit goop to your totem. At least the heat should burn off the smell. Once it has a thick coat on it, you roll the figurine in the antler shavings and use a pair of tweezers to arrange them on your totem. Thundercloud said that the magic should cause the bone shaving to mesh and completely encase the wood making for a most unusual totem. That would be keeping in form wouldn't it? You really don't care if the universe is trying to find another way to tell you how special you are. You don't have plans to put your totem out there for the public's viewing anyway.

You see Thundercloud over speaking with Lauren. Oh, crap! That can't be good. You can see the headlines now, 'Woman becomes animagus only to die of embarrassment from grandfather! Boy Who Lived somehow involved!' Rita would probably be quick to jump on the whole 'love child' bit. Hell, one little tip could keep her writing for months. Wonder what that vulture would do with Dumbledore and the

Weasleys if you were to happen to mention how your summer went to her in an anonymous letter? It's worth a thought.

You continue working while wondering what Ms. Lovegood is up to. In all the fuss you forgot your journal. You'll have to mention that you spent a good chunk of the morning painting with your own vomit. You wonder if your real life can 'Out Looney' her imagination?

Deciding to rescue Lauren from her embarrassment you call over to your sponsor, "Thundercloud, I am finished."

He returns and inspects your work and determines it to be excellent. You brush the flies away from the heart meat of the deer and wrap the totem in it. Several spells are cast and the bloody mess is set on top of a firepit. On his command, you conjure a flame and light the firepit. Once the meat burns and falls away, the pit will be covered for an hour and then you will return and dig your totem out. The whole ceremony has a certain elemental aspect to it. First the totem soaks in liquid, then cooked in fire, smothered in earth and then cooled by air – primal magic at it's finest. No doubt if this was being done at good old Hoggy Hogwarts, it would be needlessly complicated and you would have to write twelve feet of parchment on the symbolism in the ceremony and the origins of the spells used. Finest institute of magical learning, yeah right! Someday you ought to tell Granger that Hogwart's a History is nothing more than a fancy brochure.

Lauren will no longer even look in your direction. You feel bad, but for once it isn't you being embarrassed. That changes pretty quickly as soon as you cover the pit with the soil. Your super keen animal senses failed to notice the number of people that have gathered by the tent. Apparently this break in the action is a perfect time for a repeat of the new hit show, 'Let's Stuff My Daughter'! Thundercloud drives them off after a few minutes and instructs you to sit down and continue to meditate. About ten minutes after you sit down you hear a familiar voice whisper as someone sits down next to you.

"You had to tell my grandfather! I've never been so embarrassed in my life!"

You open your eyes and look at her. "He asked."

“What do you mean by that?” She says sounding incredulous.

Feeling a bit of uncontrolled anger you respond, “Do you really want an answer?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, he brought me here. He is teaching me all this. Tomorrow night, I will be back out in a jungle with your grandfather and my life may very well depend on him, Kwan or one of the others in the expedition. Their lives may depend on my actions. It’s already happened once. We’re not singing campfire songs out there! I need to trust them and they need to trust me. If maintaining that trust causes you some embarrassment, then that is your problem! Deal with it.” Probably a bit heavy handed, but you are even more of a repressed emotional bundle of nerves than you usually are and repression isn’t your strongest attribute now is it?

For a change it is the girl that is a stammering wreck after you finish your mini-tirade. “I, uh sorry. I didn’t realize. I should go.” You put your hand on her shoulder and keep her from standing

“No. Stay and meditate with me. I’m just a little angry with all these propositions.”

She remains seated next to you as you attempt to center yourself again. After a minute she asks, “Is it really that dangerous out there? Grandfather just makes it seem like he’s a tour guide or something?”

“I shouldn’t say anything. It’s not my place.” Shit! Shit! Shit! Now she is all worried about her grandfather. Good show, idiot! You’re not the only one with emotional problems right now!

“Please?”

“Your grandfather is a skilled wizard. He has a lot of wisdom and experience. I don’t have either, so what I think is scary may be nothing to him.” Though being chased by a fast dragon on a slow

broom would probably screw with Merlin even on a good day. Lets not even mention the corridor o'reptiles shall we?

"You're not really answering my question." Finding your center is pretty damn hard, when someone keeps asking you all these probing questions.

"Then speak with your grandfather. It really isn't my place to speak for him."

"If it's so scary, why are you there?"

"I'm an apprentice cursebreaker. Can't do the job without the occasional occupational hazard. Maybe I have an adrenaline issues?" It's a much better answer then 'because I have nowhere else to go'. Do you have adrenaline issues? No! It's not like you go looking for trouble.

She gets up a minute later and goes off to find her grandfather. She seems a bit upset. You hope that you didn't cause any problems for your guide. The next fifty minutes passes uninterrupted and you manage some decent meditation as you try and organize your thoughts and feelings.

"I am impressed," Your sponsor's voice interrupts your peaceful meditation. You open your eyes. Pity, you were almost half asleep.

"Why is that?"

"You managed to say something that made my granddaughter come up to me and give me a genuine hug, that wasn't some forced act of family torture. I would say that it was the first one in at least five years. It was followed by a lengthy and decidedly mature conversation. Your words left enough of an impression on her that for the moment, she sees beyond her tiny world. Come, let us retrieve your totem and say our farewells. We portkey to Las Vegas in an hour."

"What did you tell her?"

“I told her that I was never scared. The dragon was clearly chasing you.”

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Author's notes – Hope you like the more primal animagus ritual. Too often Harry gets an animagus form like some check off on a 'How to make a super Harry' checklist. Rest assured, being a jaguar animagus will be a central part of the story.

Disclaimer – Neither you (Harry Potter) nor your new animagus form are your own property. A woman back in Britain owns your rights and all other rights to those people in what is loosely referred to as the Harry Potter universe – now who's got a big head Snape! You've got your own effing universe! What do you have Snivellus – a little potion's lab, bad hair and rumors of a persistent rash? You wonder if Granger knows that someone owns her self righteous little uppity behind? How are you going to free the house elves when you don't even own yourself?

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## Chapter 12 - Sleep in Green Meadows

Somehow, you escaped the reservation without anymore of those damn propositions. Lauren had kept shooting you some incredulous looks. You were beginning to regret promising that you would come back sometime and let her ask you again. Thundercloud seemed quite pleased with himself, even going so far as to say if she asks you again after the two of you have mastered your forms that you should consider it. He had you reapply your disguise prior to arriving at the portkey point. When you asked why, he explained that the American Ministry would be able detect your use of magic once you left. The treaties specifically excluded their territories from monitoring.

Unfortunately, you are now stuck at the Steve Wynn International Portkey Terminal. It is at the end of the magical section of Las Vegas. The Portkey Center was basically a desk much like a rental car counter. An entire mall like structure had grown up around the desk. There were four pads; two for regional arrivals and departures and a duplicate set for international ones. A few Aurors, if that's what the Americans called them would check over the International arrivals,

but for the most part it looked like a smooth process. The attendant, who was supposed to be providing your portkey to Honduras had been forced to leave for a medical emergency. The supervisor politely informed your group that the next licensed portkey creator would be on duty in two hours. Kwan asked if the supervisor could create the portkey.

The man responded, "Only in the event of an emergency. This isn't an emergency. We regret any inconvenience." You hate bureaucrats don't you? He's an effing Percy if you ever saw one! You were almost hoping Kwan would open an industrial can of hitwizard whupass on him. He does it to you and you try to be nice to him! Then again, fighting your way out of the United States doesn't seem like a very good way to maintain a low profile. Find your emotional center there oh mighty jaguar Animagus!

There are a couple of shops in the terminal. You buy a couple of overpriced souvenirs. A witch with a small stand made a custom T-shirt for you - an animated shifty eyed looking squirrel who runs around on the shirt with various items appearing. The squirrel sneaks up on the objects, withdraws a ridiculously oversized mallet and destroys the item. The charm will supposedly last for two years. Luna should appreciate this. You like it so much you get a second one for yourself.

Dear Luna,

Hope you like the shirt! I had it made just for you. Now, you can never get away from the crazed squirrel!

Me

You take the shirt and the note over to Discretionary Import-Export, where the motto is 'Anywhere, Anyplace, Anytime With No Damn Questions - Ever.' You pick up a couple of other minor trinkets, pamphlets, brochures, and assorted things that Luna and Looney might like and stuff them in the box and address the box to Luna. It was kind of pricey, but you don't really care about that now do you? Maybe you could get a time turner and open your own shipping company. Your motto could be, 'Your package will arrive before you

even send it!' It's probably a better use for such a device then to allow some insufferable know it all more hours in a day to take classes. Wonder if she still gets to use one in her seventh year if you never go back – the little backstabbing hussy!

The three of you catch a bite to eat on the mezzanine and try to pass the time. You duck into the loo to relieve yourself. While lording over your imaginary kingdom from the porcelain throne two people come in.

"Idiots! Buncha fucking idiots! Can't believe that we're stuck here!"

"Chuck, this job hasn't exactly sucked so far, has it? Think about it: we just spent the week in Vegas, Vegas, baby! Action everywhere, twenty-four seven! So what, we didn't find the Potter kid – leads don't always pan out. Maybe we didn't get paid this week, but we did okay on the tables. If you wanted a steady paycheck, you picked the wrong field. Anyway, it could be a lot worse. Carson and that new dude Ivan are up in Canada for crying out loud! The newbie said he had one of his 'visions' that the prize was hiding out on the reservations. They're stumbling around in the backwoods of Manitoba right now and we're in Vegas, Vegas, baby! I don't even want to think about the bastards that are stuck checking Africa and South America! There are some serious shitholes down there."

"I guess you're right, Sean. I still think we should be checking Europe. Boy was supposedly tight with Krum. Bulgaria might be a possibility?"

"Nah. I've got a guy in the know that says the kid isn't anywhere near Europe. Those trackers over there are wasting their time."

"Speaking of Indians, did you see the guy with that old Indian out there? I'd bet your left nut that's Kwan Chang-Ho, but I don't see Collins anywhere."

"Let's leave my nuts out of this, m'kay? How about we put your jewels on the line for a change?" The other one asked slightly perturbed. They may be talking about his nuts, but it is your ass on the line!



"Can't risk the champion swimmers – too important! I thought those two were running out of Mexico these days, but I swear it looks like him."

"Yeah, like you ran with Kwan and Collins? Cut the shit." You listen to the two bounty hunters wash their hands.

"Nah, they ran through me once – one of those nasty deals where two groups show up looking for the same collar. Deal went dirty fast and turned into a free for all. They got the package. I got a broken arm and two new partners after that. Where you want to go next after LA? Boston? Back to the craps tables?"

"We can swing back by here on our way back east. If I were going to go to ground, I'd do it in New York, Boston or Miami. There are plenty of places to get lost and stay lost in any of those cities. Besides, one of my sources checked in and there's an easy collar in LA waiting for us. It's not the big score, but it'll get the bills paid."

You finally let your breath out after the pair leave and try to figure out how to unclench your sphincter. Waiting an additional five minutes, you slip out of the men's room and make your way back to Kwan and Thundercloud. Instead of sitting with them, you grab the booth next to them and pick up a discarded paper.

"We sit over here, stupid."

"There were two bounty hunters in the bathroom – one in a vest and the other in a yellow shirt. They were looking for me among other things. One of them recognized you." You hiss back from behind a copy of yesterday's USA Today.

Kwan scans the terminal. "Maybe cook not so stupid after all. I see them. Put one in the hospital once."

"They said they were heading to LA."

"Good. We let them go first. You keep reading paper and try not to look like you are hiding. Put paper on table and look down at it. Holding it up in the air says I am stupid and trying to hide."

The bounty hunters got into the line for their portkey about ten minutes later. You are very relieved to see them disappear. Soon it is your turn to take your portkey and head for the International Departures pad. International Portkeys have that same tug on the navel, but only after you feel like you have been scrunched into a small ball and kicked in the stomach once for good measure. You were pretty stoned the last time so you couldn't quite get the full experience. Too bad Thundercloud got rid of the rest of the potion supply.

The stay over in Honduras is less than fifteen minutes. You are the only ones in the transfer area and they only ask a few cursory questions, since you are just passing through. It is only in Sao Paulo, that your bags are inspected and your entry papers stamped. One last portkey puts you back in Rio. It's already four in the afternoon.

"Damn, I was starting to get worried about you three. Two more hours and I was probably going to come after you. So how did you do mate?" Bill says clapping you on the shoulder.

"It worked. I am an animagus. How are things back here?" You say nonchalantly while giving him a smirk. Let him suffer for a minute. Merlin knows he does it to you enough. Your group slowly begins walking away from the arrival platform and towards the nearby apparition point.

"What kind of animagus are you? Come on show me!"

"What are you some schoolgirl or something? I'm not doing it in public. I'm just a cat, Bill." Okay, maybe that isn't quite true. Jaguars are the third largest cats in the world, but there are bigger ones.

Bill puts on a sympathetic face. "Well, McGonagall is one. There are probably plenty of uses to being a cat. They go around mostly unnoticed. It can work to your advantage and you are right. No sense in doing it here. You can show me at the hotel. We ran into a bit of a snag here. I guess that Colastos bint sent one of her bodyguards over to Karina's for a bit of harassment. Your wards caught him off guard and Karina stunned him while he was confused. The PdM

came and was promptly bought off, but then they filed charges against you and me for illegal warding, so I had to pay a fine and a registration fee to the local wardcrafters guild. So congratulations on your wards stopping someone, but it cost you a hundred and fifty galleons for a fine and another seventy-five for a master/apprentice license. The good news is that I and by extension you can now ward to our little hearts content. Which is good, because the PdM brought over a cursebreaker and he or she tore your wards down in about ten minutes. Karina was a bit shook up, but she wanted me to tell you thanks."

You worked pretty damn hard on those wards and now they're gone. "How fast could you have taken them down, Bill?"

"Honestly, in about five minutes. Hey, no long face there 'cat man do'. Your wards did exactly what they were supposed to do, stop someone bent on harming the people you built the wards for. You should be proud. Of course, now I am a bit angry, what with my Weasley temper and all, so Fleur and I spent the better part of yesterday at the Machado's and I cooked up my own little scheme. You just missed Fleur. She sends her love. Anyway, I even diagramed it out so you can study it. I did borrow from your idea of a number of single use wards, but I didn't use any wards you'll find in an off the shelf book. Let's just say the next person Karina turns those wards on will wish they were confused and then stunned. They'll be trying to figure out how to put their body parts back in the right place. The Egyptians and Babylonians had some rather interesting schemes. It will take a professional a bit longer than ten minutes next time." Bill had been picking up speed as he was talking. He's a bit on the excitable side when it comes to his craft, isn't he?

"Slow down and take a few breaths there, Bill. Thanks for taking care of Karina's house. I look forward to seeing your diagrams and hope I can learn something from it." You still feel like someone kneed you in the family jewels; at least Karina and Chico are more protected now. "Sorry I missed Fleur. You guys do anything else?"

Bill looked at you for a moment, a strained look on his face. "I took Fleur for a spin on that broom you picked up."

"Really, how did you like it?"

"It was interesting. About this broom you picked up for me?"

"What about it?"

"Did you fly it before you bought it?"

"No didn't have a chance. The guy said it was fast and very reasonably priced. Same guy I brought the Dragonfly from. I don't think he would try and pull a fast one on me."

"Here try it and tell me what you think." Bill brought the broom out of his pocket and enlarged it.

Wondering what you are about to get yourself into, you grab the broom and hop on. A loud voice booms, "Congratulations! You have a Zambrano Markowitz Hammer between you legs - the broom of champions. Nail your opposition everytime with the Zambrano Markowitz Hammer. The ladies will all look at you, when you have a Hammer between your legs!" It repeats the slogan first in Spanish then Portuguese.

"Err, it seems to have an advertising charm on it." You really are the master of the obvious aren't you? It's kind of funny though. Even Kwan is cracking a smile.

"I kind of figured that out and you can't undo the charm without damaging the broom."

"So Fleur knows all about the Hammer between your legs?" You can't resist starting to laugh. "Oh come on Bill, that's funny. Is it at least fast?"

"It's decent. It's damn annoying though."

"Well, if you ever get to the point where you are using it. I don't think you are going to care about what what's his face is saying. Besides, if you don't want to keep it, give it to either of your youngest siblings. The boy especially could use whatever help between his legs he can

get.” You take a quick flight and test the broom speed. It sure isn’t the Firebolt, but it isn’t bad. You could have used it against the dragon. It’s less agile than the Dragonfly though. You land and the voice once again congratulates you for a successful flight with the Zambrano Markowitz Hammer. “A good silencing charm will take care of that.”

“Nope. The broom won’t work inside a silencing charm. Already tried it.”

“Sneaky. I can see why they weren’t that popular. Sorry, about that.”

“What’s worse is that people learned that it wouldn’t work in a silencing charm. Allow me to demonstrate. Silencio!” Still sitting on the hovering broom with your feet brushing the ground, the broom suddenly gives out and you end up flat on your behind looking up at a grinning Bill and the rest.

“I thought cats always land on their feet. Imagine being twenty meters off the ground when someone hits you with a silencing spell?” Bill fills in the blanks.

“Yeah, that could be a problem. Have you been practicing Arresto Momentum?”

“Funny, little kitty cat.” Oh this keeps getting better. You can’t wait to show him your little kitty cat.

“Did Karina say if she wanted me to stop by?”

“Not in so many words, but you might want to.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I sense some reluctance there. What gives?”

That is a really good question, isn’t it? Your brief time amongst the Lakota Sioux and all those ridiculous propositions has left you a bit on the wary side. What are you doing with Karina? Even better, what is she doing with you? Your flimsy argument to Fleur last week that it is a purely physical relationship seems pretty foolish. That’s what it is to

you, but what is it to her? Becoming quite the little Moody clone now aren't we? You idly wonder what finally made him snap and cross over into borderline insane? Another interesting question, does someone going insane know that they are going insane?

"I see you've been doing some hard thinking about what I said. Sometimes, it is hard to remember that you are only fifteen."

"I resent that. I'll be sixteen in three days." You quip as the group reaches the apparition point.

"That's right! I'll make sure to have the cook whip you up a cake and he can decorate the tent for a party." Bill says grinning at you and apparating away as you flip him off. You follow suit, wondering all the while how much Charlie and Bill fought as kids. Bill needs a good ass whupping every now and then. Fleur is probably up to the challenge, but not in any way that you need to imagine right now.

Bill seems curious why Thundercloud and Kwan follow you into the room. You explain that you haven't achieved clarity yet and your animal takes over after a minute or two. Bill laughs and says he'll try to remember if there is a spell to conjure a rubber mouse or a squeaky toy.

Thundercloud asks, "Are you ready and focused, Harry?" You nod in acknowledgement.

"Let's cut out the lights and close the curtains so I can see how quickly my sight adjusts when the lights come back on. I think I need to work on that."

Thundercloud smiles obviously appreciating your sense of humor and closes the curtains and casts a spell blocking the light on the other side of the window. Kwan with his wand in hand cuts the light off. Only a tiny bit of light is coming in through the crack at the bottom of the door.

"We will wait five seconds and then cut on the lights. Perform your transformation now."

You follow Thundercloud's instruction and make your transformation.

"Here kitty, kitty." You hear Bill's mocking comment right before the light comes back on. "Holy Shit! Cat my ass! Damn near crapped my britches! Forget what I said about slipping around unnoticed. Good show Harry!"

You make some kind of throaty coughing noise that must be what a feline laugh is like while lifting your claw and trying to extend one single claw on what would have been your middle finger. You continue to try and focus, but it is getting harder. The smells of the hotel room are overwhelming you. You can still smell the female and her heat. Her scent is everywhere. You smell the fake meat and answer a few questions, but it is getting so hard to think. Head hurts. Meat is fake. Meat is fake. Meat is ... Meat is.... Meat is good! Meat is tasty! First meat, then find female in heat.

After thirty minutes, you are yourself again. Meat is conjured and fake. Fleur, while decidedly hot, is not your missing mate and her scent isn't clouding your mind anymore. You worry that you might not have the same level of resistance to her charms the next time you are around her. Bill is suitably impressed and is actually a bit surprised that Thundercloud's people teach the transformation first before control. Thundercloud immediately launches into the whole 'clarity' rant, which you have decided to title "How Europeans Will Never Be True Animagi/Animagusus/Animage-Something-or-Others and are Ruining it for Everyone Who Is." Bill is open minded enough to understand. He gets it. You just picture yourself explaining to McGonagall which of you is the 'true' animagus. That would be fun. It's on your list of things to do. She really doesn't deserve a place on your must-kick-ass list, but you're not exactly best mates either.

One more demonstration later, where you still have clarity at the one minute mark – your new personal best and you and Bill leave. You convince him to go with you to Karina's house. Basically you want to say hello, get a tour of the wards and beg off without the whole getting naked thing. The same argument you gave Lauren about clarity applies here. Bill sends a simple announcing charm. It is the Wizarding equivalent of ringing the doorbell at a warded house.

Karina comes out with her wand in her hand, but immediately relaxes upon seeing the two of you.

“James! Bill! I wasn’t expecting to see the two of you until next weekend. Let me key you to the wards.”

“James wanted to make sure you and Chico were okay and I am here to show off my work and make ickle Jim-Jim green with envy.” You give Karina a hug and a chaste kiss in greetings. She smells good. No bad thoughts there, Mr. Black!

“Are you and Chico okay?”

“Yes. Thank you for the wards. It happened last Wednesday. Our little encounter with her last week caused it to happen now, but I knew it was going to happen eventually. I am sorry about all your hard work.”

“It doesn’t matter. It did what it needed to and from what Bill is telling me, he gave you a top of the line special that should give the next person stopping by a reason to go away.”

“Yes. He is very inventive. I would not like to have him for my enemy. Paulo stopped by every day after they tore down your wards. It is nice of him to make sure we were okay. He said he would try to learn what the Colastos’s reaction to all this was.”

You squelch that feeling of jealousy before it even starts. You need to remember to ask Bill if he thinks she is baiting you to get a reaction. “I got the impression that Paulo doesn’t really care for me other than as a dodgespell player.”

“Paulo and I have known each other for many years. He is a sweet man, but he can be a bit rash and easy to anger. He seems to be a bit jealous of your skills at such a young age. You must get that quite a bit.”

A certain former best mate’s face flashes across your mind. “Yeah. Every now and then it happens.”



Chico seems happy to see you and teases you about buying a Hammer for Bill. “Mr. Black, everyone knows not to buy a Hammer. They’re crap! Oops, sorry mom, they’re poop!” He definitely says what is on his mind, doesn’t he? Well, at least he isn’t inquiring about you becoming his daddy. Karina offers dinner, but both of you decline. You say that you can’t stay long and Bill and you need to discuss the expedition later. She smiles and says she understands, but you get the feeling that the two of you are now playing a game of ‘I do not need you as much as you think I need you.’ It would be nice if someone gave you the rules to this game.

As the sun begins to set, Bill gives you a tour of the wards and you are convinced that just like dueling Kwan, you wouldn’t want to try and get through a Bill Weasley custom warding job. It’s almost like he is a prankster with a decidedly violent streak. You wonder how much the twits – oops- the twins learned from him? He wasn’t kidding about a ward, which he calls a ‘forced splinching’. He used seven different one time only runes to make it, but someone trying to force entry after Karina activates them is in for one serious rude awakening! Another set of wards sprays water and then triggers a timed delayed lightning strike! He reapplied a variant to your door shielding scheme that looks similar but also incorporates a set of reflector runes. The first spell that hits it is going right back at the caster. You have much to learn from this man!

“James, I wanted to show you something out back. Bill, would you mind watching Chico for a moment?”

“No problem, Karina. Chico, why don’t you show me that one action figure you had yesterday?”

“Oh, you mean my Dumbledore. I’ve got him and Grindelwald.” You shake your head and walk outside.

“I am sorry you and I didn’t get to spend any time together. I missed you.” Karina says pulling you into an embrace. Her kiss is anything but chaste. You respond, but all the while your mind is thinking that she is trying to play a game with you. You pull away after about ten seconds.

“I’m just glad the two of you are okay.”

“Thank you for the wards. I do not think he would have become violent, but they have threatened me before. I do not believe that this is over.” She’s kissing your neck and whispering in your ear. Damn traitorous body! A hand is drifting southward. She is making her case directly to the little jaguar in your pants. Little Harry seems to be considering her story or perhaps asking her to repeat it for the sake of clarification.

“Gah! Don’t tease me like that! Maybe you and Chico should leave?” The hand stops, which is probably a good thing – you think.

“I have no real options at the moment, but it may be a long term option. Paulo said the same thing. He even hinted that he might be able to help and will stop by if he hears something.”

Okay. Maybe you are the second coming of Alastor Moody, but so far she has mentioned Paulo a couple of times and now the words ‘long term option’. She might just be on a fishing expedition. Care to guess who she is trying to reel in? She is old enough to know that no guy likes a girl to be kissing him and talking about another bloke at the same time. You’re pretty sure it is a rule or something. You cup her cheek pulling her lips to yours for a series of short kisses.

“I really have to get going.”

“When I see you next weekend, I will have to give you a special treat.” You nod like an idiot while she gives a mock pout before releasing you. It looks like you are again about to be saddled with a case of blue balls, but for all the right reasons. You smile and slip back inside. Bill and Chico are having it out with the action figures. You are rooting for Grindelwald for obvious reasons. After a few more minutes the two of you leave.

“So?” Bill asks after apparating back to the hotel alley.

“She seemed to be coming on strong. Snogging the magic out of me one second and telling me how much Paulo is going to help her the

next. I probably could have done it in the backyard. Is she playing me?”

“Yeah. I think so. She might have just gone from grateful to needy. The attack probably rattled her more than she’ll ever say. I don’t think the sex is going to be just casual anymore. Better sort out those feelings pretty quick. Might be easiest if the next time she says Paulo, you throw a fit and tell her to go shag him.”

“Do you think she would use a fertility potion? It overrides contraceptive charms.”

“Do I want to know what have you been up to this weekend?”

Two hours later, you are both kicked back in the hotel room watching the telly. It isn’t as embarrassing telling Bill about all the propositions as it would be say Luna, but it is still humiliating enough. Still, your cursebreaking mentor has instructed you in the male contraceptive charm. It takes away some of the fun, but the swimmers might as well be swimming in the ocean for all the good they’ll do. You’re getting bored with the movie. Though both Bill and you agree that the actor playing the Sheriff of Nottingham looks a bit like Snape, but the guy playing Robin Hood isn’t even English for crying out loud! So you pull out the journal and you decide to catch up with Luna.

Dear Harry, (or is it Deer Harry – if that ends up being your form!)

I guess you were right about those potions you were taking. Well, I will answer your questions to the best of my abilities.

I am not nor have ever been made of green cheese. If I ever find myself in that condition, I will try and note what it feels like, so that I can give you a full report.

Thank you for telling me that I am ‘a scorching blonde hottie’. I’ll pause for a moment so that you can flip back and read your last letter to me. I am guessing you weren’t quite in your right frame of mind, which is ironic coming from me isn’t it? Who is this Karina you compared me to? Should I be jealous?

On the topic of Millicent Bulstrode, I don't really think that she and Ron would make a 'dream couple', though you make several valid points that girls with back hair need loving too. I will however find a way to mention that to him at some point during the upcoming year, if for no other reason than to see the look on Hermione's face.

I am willing to concede that the invention of smores was a more important invention than the wheel, but fire must be more important, for without fire there would be no melted chocolate for the smores to exist. However, your argument could be plausible if fire was invented for no other reason than to create the first smores.

I'll stop now, because you are now most likely thoroughly embarrassed. I could not stop laughing when I read your last letter and I know you were a bit wonky in the head. Don't be upset. However, don't be surprised if that letter turns up later in your life when you are running for political office. Please continue writing, I require more blackmail material.

For my part, I spent my final two days in Sweden in a fairly large city. Daddy allowed me to venture out with some of the local muggles (most likely so he could indulge in Peppermint Schnapps) and I discovered the magic that is Karaoke. There is apparently a law in Sweden that young blonde girls, especially us hotties must be able to sing the lyrics to songs by the band Abba. I was found in gross violation of this law by my companions and was reeducated onstage. If interested, you may apply to be the president of my fan club. I was thinking FALL – Fans Appreciating Luna Lovegood, but you are welcome to come up with your own name so long as it doesn't resemble SPEW.

Your Scorching Blonde Hottie,

Luna

You flip back and reread the letter. Bill clearly gave you back the journal too early. You don't even remember writing it, but it's all there – right down to calling her a 'scorching blonde hottie every bit as smoking as Karina.' She has a second entry from last night.

Dear Harry,

I am back in England now. I hope this is just a case of you forgetting the journal and not my last letter. I was having fun and don't want you to stop writing because of something you wrote while you were suffering from the effects of a hallucinogenic potion. If you were offended, please forgive me? I'm catching up on the news. I don't know how well you knew Susan Bones, but her aunt was killed. She was the head of DMLE! The Ministry is publishing mostly useless things in an effort to make people believe they are safe. Most of the stuff is just crap and a few of their articles even contradict themselves. I was hoping they would lower the age to use magic, but that isn't going to happen. They voted Fudge out. The new guy is Rufus Scrimgeour. Daddy says it's not a good sign. He said that the new guy reminds him too much of Barty Crouch. They have made a couple of arrests. One of them was the bloke from the Knight Bus! Hard to believe isn't it?

I talked to Ginny on the floo. She was rather subdued. I asked if you were there, but no you are staying where it is safe with your relatives. I am happy you are safe. No dragons chasing you around. She said that they are going someplace soon and she won't be able to talk with me until school starts. Diagon Alley looks pretty deserted. The old creepy wand guy just up and disappeared and four other shops just boarded up and closed. One of the few bright spots is Fred and George's store. I asked about some of the damage and they claimed it was an accident caused by faulty fireworks.

So that's what is going on. Now pickup your writing implement and tell me whether or not you are an animagus yet!

Your friend,

Luna

Dear Luna,

You were right. I forgot the journal. I am also quite ashamed of my last letter. I am an animagus. It is really interesting. Dare I say, it

borders on being 'cool'? The transformation was memorable, I can definitely tell you that much.

I hope you were not offended by the phrase 'scorching blonde hottie'. I don't even know where I came up with it to be honest. Whatever it was, it was meant to be a compliment – so please take it that way. Of course the last time you saw me I had the hair coloring charm on, was I not also a scorching blond hottie?

I apparently also had the munchies for smores that night. Did the chocolate smudges transfer to your journal as well?

Glad to hear you had a lot of fun singing. I've heard a couple of Abba songs before. I must now start my own little stockpile of blackmail material.

Karina is a person I played Dodgespell with. She is pretty and in her mid twenties with a five year old boy named Chico. She has been helping me with getting all my supplies for cooking and what not.

The animagus ritual was pretty bizarre. The Native Americans do it much differently than the Europeans. It is more about learning how to work with your animal spirit and instincts then trying to learn how to control your animal form. I spend a lot of time meditating now. After a minute or two I lose 'clarity' and sink further into my animal. Hard to picture McGonagall ever doing it this way!

I had heard much of the news last time I was with that manipulating bastard who calls himself Headmaster. He had me go meet this one geezer who will probably be teaching there this year named Slughorn or Slughead. Keep an eye out for him. He seems like a slimier version of Lockhart.

Well that is about all for now. I have to go practice my super cool animagus form. Be on the lookout for a box from me. I just wanted you to know, so you don't think it is some Death Eater booby trap or something.

Yours,

Harry

Closing the journal, you tell Bill goodnight and go into the tent where you will be sleeping this evening. You grab a neglected runes book and start reading until you tire. Fifteen minutes of mediation calms your mind before drifting off to sleep.

By noon the next day, you are back in the tent again – except that the tent is now back at the second expedition site. Once again in the Brazilian State known as Amazonas. You portkey to a standard point and from there it is apparition or broom travel to your final destination. Last week Thundercloud flew ahead in his animagus form and scouted the area. This week is much easier because you already have the location to apparate to and you are no longer stoned. It is a good thing, because the area is known for dense rainforests.

You've already had your morning animagus practice along with a quick workout with Kwan and are now serving lunch to the team.

"Bill, I have been wondering something?"

"What's that?"

"These ruins have been around for centuries. How come no one ever broke in?"

"It's a good question. The answers vary. Sometimes the jungle or in Egypt the desert swallows the ruins whole. Fleur has a squib uncle on her father's side who works for the muggles in the European Space Agency. He was able to get me some high-resolution images from their satellites orbiting the Earth and access to their computer system. Normally, they use these computers for detailed mappings of the moon and Mars I guess. I might sound like my dad for a minute, but muggles can do some pretty amazing things. I was able to spend two solid weeks going over this jungle looking for unexplored ruins with the help of their computers. Everything says that the hidden city is in this region somewhere. Unfortunately, their technology can't get around the fidelius charm. I checked by looking at a high resolution picture of a certain London neighborhood, if you know what I mean?"

For a change, you do know what he means. You nod. "I was just wondering how we're the only ones that ever found these places."

"Good thing the magical world hasn't caught up with the non magical world. I am guessing that there won't be any untouched ruins left in this area of the world. I intend to crack my share of those while they are still out there."

"So what do you need me to do?"

"This afternoon, I want you to help Maria with the Sapper. You ever heard of one before? Didn't think so. A Sapper is what you use when you can't exhaust the charging runes that power the wards. This area is too thick with magical energy and that overgrown Ziggurat is warded like a fortress. We spent all last week just finding the perimeter wards. The Sapper is just a big rock or series of rocks with charging runes and a whole bunch of meaningless and wasteful rune schemes on it just to drain power. The more power we divert from their wards, the less there is to try and keep their field up. We need at least two here. There is a story about a witch four centuries ago trying to attack Hogwarts. She it five Sappers before she started really causing problems for the wards at the castle. If I were to try attacking there, I'd use eight at a minimum."

"Sounds interesting. What are the downsides to using one?"

"Well it can only drain the ambient magic. If you have some other way of powering your wards like all those little siphon runes or blood wards, it won't entirely work. You still have to rely on the old counter ward chants and things like our brute force attack to bring them down. The next part is they are a big bundle of exposed magical energy. If they are damaged during a battle they could go boom. The recommended method is to keep them disillusioned or bury them in the ground beforehand and then activate them when you are ready to attack."

You've been reading on basic counter ward chants and already know a few of them. Cursebreaking is more and more interesting every day isn't it? Ward chants are used against perimeter wards and other wards that don't 'fight back'. The witch, wizard or group of wizards



basically throws their magical energy against the wards in an effort to bring them down either by negation or by overwhelming them with energy.

Wonderful household magic helps clear away everyone's lunch. You already have the steaks Collins requested for tonight marinating and have the portable grill set up outside. Bill said he would walk you through some basic critter wards to repel the vermin while running the grill. So you sit down with the ugliest cursebreaker in the land and she starts showing you the schemes she laid out on the first sapper in permanent ink. One guess who gets to do all the carving? Good thing you have your trusty tiny hammer and chisel isn't it?

"The more wasteful and inefficient the rune schemes are the better. I will inspect your work and tell you where your runes are wrong, but this is the one case in cursebreaking where it is okay and even expected to be sloppy with your carving. The runes still need to work, so you shouldn't go overboard, but you understand, right?"

You nod as the hag leaves you to your rune carving. You really shouldn't keep calling her names – she is almost tolerable these days. Bill is with Collins checking the extent of the ruins perimeter on the north and West. Sanchez is going with Kwan to check the South and East. You start working on the charging runes she had outlined. You've improved your time on carving charging runes. You're down to fifteen minutes per rune. After completing five runes, Thundercloud sits across from you and begins carving on the other side. You arch an eyebrow in surprise. He merely mentions that it has been awhile since he has done this sort of thing. He has a constant repetitive motion to his carving. Yours is less fluid as you worry about if you are carving too deeply or if you are dovetailing by carving too wide or narrow channeling by carving too narrow.

"Any signs of activity in the valley?"

"I saw some tracks towards the north. They were either giant or troll and are fairly recent. I let the others know. I saw the little Saci again and he said there are goblins in this area."

"Goblins? Out here? Why?"

“Probably renegades. There was a minor rebellion in South America about eight years ago. Some of the rebels probably headed out in this direction and to escape both the wrath of their clan and the South American ministries. They shouldn’t be a problem.”

If there is one thing you have learned in your short life, it is never to say things like, ‘They shouldn’t be a problem.’ Karma is a vindictive fickle bitch and for some reason she has an unhealthy interest in disrupting your life. Statements like that always seem to come back to haunt you, don’t they? ‘Why no Ron, I am not at all interested in the Triwizard tournament?’ ‘Welcome to another year at Hogwarts - for your protection the Ministry has stationed Dementors on the school grounds.’ ‘Joining our staff this year is Professor Gilderoy Lockhart.’ ‘Joining our staff this year by decree of the Minister is Undersecretary Delores Umbridge.’

Paranoia at such an early age is both a blessing and a curse isn’t it? You return to your carving and are halfway finished with your next rune, when the campsites perimeter wards trigger. Bill set them at one hundred meters to alarm on the movement of anything heavier than ten kilos. Grabbing your wand, you head out the tent flap with Thundercloud right behind you. The alarm for the second set of wards set at fifty meters triggers. It is a series of stinging and confundus hexes designed to drive whatever it is away.

“There! By that cluster of trees! Trolls!” The Indian’s eyesight is damn sharp. You see three large shapes struggling forward against the wards. Their thick hides absorbing the power of the wards slapping against them with sounds that remind you of a bug zapper. The last layer of wards at ten meters is based on incapacitation with ropes and chains. It will slow them down, but it definitely won’t stop them. You’ve got about a minute before they get here.

“What’s the plan, Thundercloud?”

“Drive them off and don’t let them kill us. If we can stop them from entering the camp, we will. Keep your broom handy in case we need to run for it. We can always replace the equipment.” It is a brilliant

and simple plan. You wonder if the others are close enough to realize what is going on.

The eagle animagus turns to a large rock and begins a complex transfiguration. It grows legs and a tail becoming a wolf, a follow on compulsion charm sends it charging towards the group of trolls. You are busy summoning two snakes. Thundercloud adds two of his own snakes. You order all four of the serpents to attack the trolls.

“They don’t look like they are going to leave!” You watch as the howling wolf is swatted away like an irritating puppy and fails to rise. The trolls clubs crush the conjured snakes. A crackle of magic signifies that the charging runes powering the second layer fall. Definitely not good things! Thundercloud begins throwing direct damage spells. You do the same. At this range and with the jungle for cover, most cutters and blasters are mostly worthless against something that resistant to magic. You fire wand arrows and piercing curses. Concentrated and damaging magic retains it’s effectiveness but requires excellent targeting – or at least good luck. You hear a few howls of pain as they begin to close. All the trees in the way make it difficult to really score too many hits. The clearing is right at the last set of wards. You blast a few of the trees in their path to try and slow them down and separate them a little.

“Harry, when they get close, use a banisher. It should drive your arrows further into their flesh! Tell these snakes to wait to attack until they get through the trees!” Thundercloud instructs you as he conjures two more serpents. You conjure one more of your own and hiss the instructions.

The first troll bursts into the clearing with three of your magic arrows sticking in it like darts. Chains and ropes spring from the ground tripping it as your second wave of conjured snakes attack.

“Tonare! Impactus! Tonare!” You fire two blasting curses and a bludgeoner at the fallen troll, trying both to injure it and keep it close to the ground for the snakes. A misty spray of troll blood, rises from the creature’s back as it lashed in retaliation at the three snakes surrounding it. The other two trolls stop short of the clearing as Thunderclouds fireball smashes into a tree spraying them with flames.

They grab the injured troll and pull it back into the jungle, apparently withdrawing. Thundercloud switches to stinging hexes to 'chase them away'. You call off the one still living snake.

"I will follow them to locate their lair. Alert the others, when they return. The trolls will regroup and probably come back under the cover of darkness." Thundercloud says shifting to his eagle form.

"I'll reset the second layer of wards and power them up." You have to admit life is much better with wards. Otherwise the three trolls would not have been so easily driven off. Looking around you spot the first two charging runes. You stick your wand on the first one and begin a simple siphoning chant allowing power to flow from you to the charging rune giving it some energy and reducing the time required for a full recharge. Feeling a slight drain, you move on to the second charging rune. Only six more to go! Of course you shouldn't whine like that. These eight charging runes just did more to prolong your life than the majority of the Hogwarts staff has ever done. True, the old geezer charmed a goblin statue to keep Tommy from offing your stupid ass in the atrium and there was that whole Arresto Momomentum thing after the Ministry provided security attacked you, but other than Dumbledore wanting to keep his weapon intact has anyone else ever done anything for you? Hell, Crouch Junior did more than most of them! Snape kept you on a broom once, no doubt against his best wishes. You wonder if Kwan or Collins know that jinx. It would be worth learning especially if it is wandless. Hell, maybe they had their wands up their sleeves. It could come in handy, especially if you see Malfoy flying again someday. Maybe you can get up with the Hammer Manufacturers and get them to make a Malfoy Flying Ferret complete with the same silencing charm problems.

Keeping that rather amusing thought in your head, you move around to recharge expended runes. You injured a troll pretty badly today. Tonight in the darkness, it's going to come back with friends. That's okay. You'll be waiting for them. Unlike other cats, a jaguar doesn't play with their prey. The origin of the word is from an old Tupi Indian phrase – Beast that Kills in a Single Bound. That beast is part of you now and it is eager for a fight.

Authors Notes – Hope you enjoyed it. It's high time this story got back in the jungle where it belongs. Next chapter your group gets to 'rumble in the jungle' with some uninvited guests.

Disclaimer – You're in a bit of a hurry. There's a battle coming. JKR claims to own you and everything about you, but do you think she's going to help you in this battle? No, of course not!

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## Chapter 13 – Well Let's Bungle in the Jungle

You often wonder about your decisions in life. How different would things be if Mum and Dad trusted someone other than the rat? What could have happened if Sirius had thought about his godson's well being first and his need for revenge second? Why did you always talk yourself out of poisoning Vernon's food? You won't even go into all the stupid crap at Hoggy Hogwarts. There's too much to cover and it always makes your head hurt anyway. This summer has been one of violent change for you hasn't it? Maybe you should have just hung out with the redheads from hell and continue to exist in blissful, potion induced ignorance. Then again, you wouldn't be having all this fun now would you?

Your current 'fun' is best described as a bizarre waiting game. Let's call it 'Cursebreaker Dinner Party', shall we? As soon as Thundercloud returned and told the group that the three injured trolls met up with four additional trolls and some goblins near a cave complex to the west, Bill started asking what nasty tricks everyone had stockpiled. You felt proud of your three little fletcher wards that you were still carving for practice. Your pride quickly changed to self-consciousness as soon as everyone else started pulling out their nasty single use wards and other assorted implements of torture out of their trunks. Collins each had a set of runes he liked to call 'a whole lotta whupass' and described them as the equivalent of muggle land mines. Thundercloud quite literally had 'lightning in a bottle', though he called it an old moonshine jug. Kwan had these little pieces of folded parchment origami animals with tiny intricate runes painted on them. They grow to ten times their size and run or fly up to their target and blow up. Bill was impressed enough to ask the name of the person that created them – Kwan's uncle.

Finally, the two cursebreakers tried to out do each other with their little stashes of nastiness. You could only look on as Sanchez and Weasley pulled out various sets of runes. Bill's were violent enough ranging from the simple 'Three Reductors in a Can' and one he called 'Fun with Severing Charms' to the complex 'Firewall' and 'Plague of Locusts'. Sanchez, however, was the clear winner with her bizarre six-rune collection that combines to create a twenty by twenty-meter patch of carnivorous plants. She also had a little group of three runes, which she gave a hag-like grin and asked Thundercloud if he would like to see Old Faithful in the Brazilian Rainforest. Bill muttered that he used his coolest stuff at Karina's house. Bill is a bit of a sore loser isn't he? Then again, he is a Weasley.

Somehow your little arrow wards didn't seem that impressive anymore, but Bill still wanted to use them anyway. Okay, so you've got a bit of 'runic trap envy' going on here. In your defense, you didn't exactly get a chance to prepare for this expedition anyway! No one will look down on you for your wards performance. The power of the ward doesn't matter. It's how you use it! Right?

So now you're out there waiting for the 'Dinner Party' guests to arrive. Not having much else to do, you draw a few temporary fletcher wards in the air with your wand and power them up. They will only last for thirty minutes, but you're not doing anything at the moment. You've got to learn some more impressive wards. No wonder Bill called the book you got them out 'practical, but uninspired.'

"Okay. If they break through the last line of wards, everyone get airborne. We'll pick them off from above. The trolls won't be able to get up to us, but the goblins might have their poisoned crossbows. Keep your bezoars handy. If this is indeed a rogue clan, you should expect to see them using Worg. They may even have a golem siege engine. Too many and we bail."

You listen to Bill's cautions as you scan about the camp. The real tent is packed up and disillusioned up in a tree. A fake decoy one has been set out. The original wards are still there, but now there is a hastily erected set of last line wards.

Amazingly enough, you actually have Binns to thank for knowing what Worg is! One of the few meaningful details in his class was how goblins fight their battles. The potion allows a goblin to temporarily assume the form of either a jackal, wild boar, small bear or a flaming bat for roughly fifteen minutes. For extra credit, Granger owed the goblins at Gringotts to ask what determines the shape taken. The goblins responded that if she kept asking questions about Worg, they would report her to the Ministry per the treaty they were forced to sign. You feigned sympathy at her outburst when she received that letter.

Naturally, Wizarding society has banned Worg from the goblin clans, but they always seem to have a large stockpile when the next uprising begins – fancy that! Surprisingly enough, the beater bat in quidditch was often used by flying wizards and witches to beat away the firebats that would swarm broom riders and try to ignite their brooms or magic carpets in addition to biting, clawing or burning the rider. Ron awoke long enough to learn that some of the early quidditch tactics for beaters were based off of lessons learned in the goblin wars. On the ground, the jackals are small and fast, boars and bears are a bit slower but more powerful. They use swarm tactics to bring humans down. In addition, the potion raises their innate magical resistance.

Goblins aren't particularly tough fighters in their natural form. After all, they leave all the warding to the cursebreakers. The trolls, dragons, chimeras and various other nasty critters serve as guards. To make up for it, they are dangerously cunning and ruthless. One of your history teachers, back when you still took real world history joked about Napoleon and Hitler having short man's disease. Goblins seem to have it even worse. To complicate matters, they breed like rabbits. Overpopulation fuels revolts amongst their kind and rebellion against the magical ministries.

You idly wonder how your animal form would stack up against bears and trolls? It's an option, though Thundercloud has already warned you against such an action. "Giving in to your animal in the middle of an area filled with lethal wards is a recipe for disaster."

As you power up your fourth temporary fletcher ward, Thundercloud lands and shifts back to his human form. "They are coming. They



follow roughly the same approach as before, but if I know them they will split into smaller groups and attack on many sides at once. The trolls have crude shields now. They are supported with over a dozen inferius, mostly goblin and troll bodies, and I spotted two constructs. I will disable the animated catapults from behind as they come into range. I can out fly a firebat. I've had to do it more than once in my lifetime. If I do it quick enough, I can apparate back here."

Five tense minutes and one additional fletcher ward later, the perimeter wards activate you summon a trio of snakes and instruct them to wait by the tent until the creatures come into the clearing. Goblins can't create the undead, at least from what you know. They had to have a human make the inferius for them.

The deterrent layer wasted it's energy on the trolls and undead. Dozens small dots of light could be seen hovering above the tree line. The firebats would wait for the wards to go down and the main forces to engage and then try and swiftly flank your group to overwhelm you. In the darkness the glow from the wards discharging, reminded you of the stories Thundercloud told you of watching the Northern Lights. The crackle of explosions reaches your ears as the eagle animagus executes his ambush. The distant lights of the firebats turn like an angry swarm of insects and head towards the explosions. You toss a couple of exploding curses out into the darkness, hoping to add to the confusion. You try and line up a shot, but the jungle obscures your line of fire. Feeling a little insecure and outnumbered you summon two more snakes and tell them to wait with their brethren. The last summoning made you feel a bit lightheaded, probably not a great idea in hindsight. You really need to get some real snakes. This is Brazil for crying out loud! They've got the bushmaster, one of the most deadly snakes in the world. You should get one of those!

The trolls continue to stagger forward against the wards. They reach the edge of the incapacitation layer. The ropes and chains spring out of the ground, but rebound harmlessly against their rough-hewn wooden shields. Time to see how well you can spellchain. Kwan taught you a simple three-spell spellchain to use, blasting curse, severing charm and bludgeoner. All the movements basically flow into each other.

“Tonare!” Swish high, swish to center, jab directly at target.

“Lacero!” Wand pointed directly at target, slash upwards, twist and slash downwards ending near the waist.

“Impactus!” Flick upwards towards target twice, finishing incantation on second flick and raising wand high and maintaining eye contact with target. The high point is exactly where you begin the swish high for...

“Tonare!”

You continue to cast as your spells slam into the trolls shield. The first exploding curse cracks wood. The severing charm carves a deep chasm into it. The bludgeoner sends pieces of wood debris spraying into the troll like daggers. It screams in fury. The anger turns to pain as the next exploding curse catches it in the upper thigh ruining the flesh and causing the monster to stumble. The troll's stumble buys it a moment of relief as your severing charm misses high and to the left, but the following bludgeoner strikes it dead center in the face like a cricket bat. It falls as your snakes slither towards it. If it isn't dead now, it soon will be.

Casting six spells and completing two full links that quickly takes a toll on you. If you felt lightheaded before, you're a bit dizzy now. A second troll was tripped either by the wards or someone's spell and landed in the middle of the carnivorous plants and is now screaming in agony. The plants, which are munching on said troll and various animated goblin corpses that continue to walk unconcerned through them regardless of the chunks of missing flesh have an almost rhythmic quality to their thrashing. Sanchez is picking the inferius off one by one with her blasting curses and severing charms.

Two bears and a boar come charging through the perimeter towards you, but hit one of Collin's runic landmines and are tossed into the air in a gory mess. The next group is a jackal and a bear. You manually trigger two of your fletcher wards. With a flash of insight, or the old thinking on your feet thing as it were, you cast an engorgement charm at the arrows speeding away from you. The charm causes the two out of the six arrows to swell to three times their size. Instead of

an arrow striking the bear, something the size of a javelin impales it. Pity, the other one missed, but the bear is already convulsing in death throes. One quick reductor curse crushes the skull of the limping jackal with an arrow through one of its hind legs.

More and more creatures are pouring into the clearing. You banish a boar followed by a jackal into Sanchez's field of screams. Do those plants ever get full? A quick glance at Kwan makes you realize that he is more than adept at using unforgivables for purposes other than training you. You expected the green light of the killing curse. Instead, you see two trolls locked in mortal combat – one clearly under the imperius curse, while the Korean man fights around them. Yet another troll lay in a smoldering heap from ten of the origami mobile bombs. You begin casting your spellchain again as Collins moves up on your right flank. The green light of his killing curse drops a bear in its tracks.

"Some fun, kiddo! It's going to get worse. Weasley's firewall and that damn plant thing are steering them towards us! Here little piggies! Avada Kedarva!" One charging boar dies instantly and blows up a second later. The second is sliced viciously by your severing charm and falls with a squishy thud as your bludgeoner hits it. You trigger another fletcher ward and are quicker with the enlargement charm as three spears instead of arrows fly outbound. Collins is morbidly singing the 'This little piggy' nursery rhyme in between his castings.

"Nice engorging there kiddo! Here I thought those things were useless. This little piggy got cut in half! Lacero! And this little piggy went 'wee wee wee' all the way home. Pello Hostis! Hey, when pigs fly! When I tell you release your last two wards. You grow em and I'll set em on fire – Flaming Spears of Death!"

The Hitwizard from Texas is a bit unbalanced and sadistic isn't he? On the other hand the idea is perfectly sound. Seconds later six fiery spears fly out into the night causing more than one howl of pain. Mental note, find engorging runes, ignition runes and pair them up with the fletcher ward. Wonder if Bill will like it? You never even noticed when your snakes died. If you got a real one you could engorge it too!

"Congratulations! You have a Zambrano Markowitz Hammer between you legs - the broom of champions. Nail your opposition every time with the Zambrano Markowitz Hammer. The ladies will all look at you, when you have a Hammer between your legs!" Well listen to that. Bill's on his broom now as the slogan continues in Spanish then Portuguese. A swarm of firebats is headed towards him. He's got Thundercloud's moonshine jug. Uh oh! This is going to be loud.

What firebats weren't electrocuted instantly are scattered to the winds by the thunderclap. Hell, it knocked you, Collins and most everything else off their feet too! Mental note revised, learn how to make lightning in a bottle – much more important than Flaming Spears of Death! You cast a few more quick curses at some of the changed goblins that are slow to their feet and hop on your dragonfly. With no wards left the rest are mounting up as well.

You stop to banish a boar charging the sluggish Collins. The delay proves to be your undoing as a pair of jackals blindside you and knock you off your hovering broom. The thrashing mongrels fall on top of you. With your gauntleted left hand you push one off you and reductor it point blank. The other jackal bites into your right upper arm causing Holly and Phoenix feather to fall away as you punch the jackal in face. That made it let go. Spinning on the ground you kick it and scramble for your wand.

The good news is its two meters away on the ground in plain sight right next to your broom.

The bad news is both a boar and a jackal are in between you and your wand.

The bad news for them – you are one angry badass jaguar animagus! Forget naked Fleur! Forget sex with Karina! Forget Lauren's massive Indian breasts! Your next patronus is the look in those fuckers little eyes when you shift into your form and charge them. The crack of the boar's spinal column is music to your ears. The little mutt nips at your injured foreleg. Pain! Your other foreleg rips its entire left side open. The rush of excitement consumes you. Hunt them! Stalk them! Toy with them! Kill them! Your jungle! Yours!

The creatures scatter from you. You are master of the jungle. Another mutt, another dead mutt! They are all meat, small meat, big meat, and tasty squealing meat. Those first! Into the darkness of the jungle they flee. You chase them. Smells like blood! Smells like fear! You growl with pleasure. Small meat changing. Taste different. Not like taste. Meat no good. Look for better meat.

Can't find better meat. Find more bad meat to kill. Pain! Bad meat behind tree? No. Bad meat hiding in bush? No. Bad meat running through jungle away from you? Yes. Pounce. Kill. Bad tasting meat hurt you with little shiny thing! Hurt it! Knock to ground! Crush skull! Scream bad meat, scream! Quiet now move away. More bad meat over there. Bad meat sees you points little thing at you. Pain. Bad meat hurt you from over there. Go over there and kill. Bad meat drink something turn into big meat. Other bad meat stings you while you fight big meat. Circle big meat. Go faster than big meat. Pounce on big meat. Big meats claws hurt you while bad meat tries to sting you. Sting misses you. Claw doesn't. Dodge big meats claw! Claw big meat's face. Rip big meats throat open! Now kill bad meat. Another sting. Run away from bad meat! Tired. Getting tired. Find place to hide from bad meat. Get away from bad meat. Hide under bushes. Go to sleep.

Hours later you come to. You're on a bed. It's not one of the hammocks from the tent. How long have you been out? It's dark outside. Last thing you remember is running into the jungle after the fleeing goblins. You were in your animal form. Oh crap! Thundercloud said that was a really bad idea didn't he? Poppy would have a fit, wouldn't she? There is something gritty in your mouth. Tastes like ... Tastes like ... Tastes like something you would find in the stomach of a goat, Potter! Yum. Bezoar Crunch, it's the tasty part of this nutritious breakfast. Try Bezoar Crunch! It really does taste like the inside of a goat's stomach.

"Oh look, you're awake." Bills cheery voice says as he holds up a pot next to you. Why is he doing that, anyway? "I have just one question for you? Does goblin really taste like chicken?"

You spend the next minute or so puking your guts out, while idiot cursebreaker howls with laughter. You really need to hurt him sometime. He deserves it. It's justifiable isn't it?

He hands you a nausea potion, vanishes your vomit, and a can of root beer to wash it down with. "Drink up. Gave us a bit of a scare there, Harry. You had quite a bit of goblin poison in your system. We pulled two poisoned crossbow bolts from your body and you must have run into one of the bears and got roughed up a bit. I'll spare you the usual 'you should have been dead' spiel. Thundercloud says an animagus of your caliber is much more durable than the rest of us mortals, so we can dispense with that. I'll simply say, next time focus on your own safety a bit more."

Bill helps you get out of bed and you shuffle over to use the bathroom. You're sore in a lot of places. Harry Potter has definitely seen better days, but you've seen worse ones too.

"You've been out for almost a day. Since it is after midnight, allow me to be the first to wish you a happy sixteenth birthday. There probably won't be a cake later, unless we get one from the hotel. My idiot cook got himself injured. We're at a hotel in the magical side this time. Couldn't exactly drag you into our usual place looking like this. Instead of look what the cat dragged in, we had to drag in the cat to look him over."

"Oh, funny. Don't quit your day job. Is everyone else, okay? Where's my wand? My broom?"

"A few bruises and bites. Thundercloud is nursing a broken leg. He's out of commission for a few days until it magically heals. Sanchez's nose is broken, actually distracts you from her hideously ugly face. Collins told her to keep the look. Crazy bitch grabbed him by his balls and squeezed till he screamed like a little girl. Kwan and I had to keep them from killing each other. He threatened to blow her arm off and she cast a sticking charm on her hand and said, 'Go ahead. Blow you cajones off. See if I care.' So, you've missed some good times. Your wand is right here and the broom is stored in the tent. Other questions?"

You take your wand back. You put on your best 'dejected' look and ask, "How long am I stuck here?"

"Do I look like Pomfrey? You're a big boy now, Harry. You've proven you can take care of yourself to me. I wouldn't go play a dodgespell tournament or anything, but if you think you are ready to get out of bed, I'm not going to argue unless you can't function as part of the team. Just take it easy for a day or two. Go see Karina, if you feel like you need some tender loving care. Kwan did the healing work on you. He's a pretty decent healer, by the way. You might ask him for some pointers as often as you end up like this."

You stare at him a bit gob smacked. You were ready for some kind of Pomfrey or Molly Weasley speech. This was definitely not it. "Um, okay." You wonder if he took that 'acting like his Mum' comment before you left for the US as an insult. Then again, you keep saying how you want to be treated like an adult; maybe this is his way of granting your wish? "What about the goblins?"

"I took the clan insignia and a few doses of Worg off of a couple of the goblins we killed. They're rebels just like we suspected. The local goblins have granted me a private audience tomorrow. Since we still want to get into the ruins, we are probably going to have to root out the goblins first. To do that, we need some muscle of our own. Goblins out in the open are tough, but you see we did well against them. Goblins dug in to a tunnel complex are much tougher. I've got a bit of a reputation that I can use here. They don't want rumors of goblins using Worg to get out to the ministries. I need to convince them to help us with the rebels. I think we can come to an accord."

You smile at Bill's grin. "I am guessing that we are going to leave it up to them to dispose of any Worg that we come across?"

He laughs and replies with a sarcastic voice, "Oh, of course! They're treaty bound to destroy the stuff. Oh here's your trunk. Your carving material is in there too. Collins told me about Flaming Spears of Death. It was very inventive on your part. You've got good instincts. Golden rule – Avoid being a Cookbook Cursebreaker at every opportunity. If the scheme you are using is in a book, anyone can and will buy that book. Hell, most quality books list a scheme and then

right after it discuss how to go about breaking it. Warding from a book will stop the untrained, but if you are going to go up against a pro, or someone willing to do some reading – you need to create your own schemes. It might be a bit complex for just a single use ward, but I threw a book on manipulation runes in your trunk. You should find runes for enlarging an object and making it ignite in there. Try and make it all on one piece of carving stone, but don't charge it until I'm around. Incorrectly charging a brand new scheme is dangerous. Plus the runes may be incompatible. Why are there like five or six different runes for the same concept? Simple, some runes won't work with other runes in a scheme, but creating your own disposable rune is NEWT level work in Ancient Runes."

Bill finishes and gets up to leave. "There is a touchstone on the dresser. Tap it to summon the hotel house elf. It will bring you food. You're in room six. I'm across the hall in seven. Thundercloud is in ten. The rest are on the second floor. I'll let Thundercloud know you are awake in the morning. He wants to do some more animagus stuff with you. Let one of us know if you leave the hotel. I've told them the same thing."

Deciding you've slept enough for the moment, you open your journal to catch up with Luna. You hum happy birthday to yourself.

Dear Arse,

In the line below the letter you will need to fill in your animagus form. I distinctly notice that you avoided disclosure of said form in your last letter. Failure to comply will be grounds for reprisals, if you know what I mean?

I'd love to hear the full story behind this animagus ritual you were talking about. It sounds completely wicked! If you play your cards right, I'll allow you to teach me, though you might be distracted by my scorching blonde hotness!

You asked earlier about Ancient Runes at school. Much of it so far is memorization and translation through third year. It's more like a languages course. The emphasis is on Celtic, Norse and Germanic runes with a smidgeon of Greek and Egyptian thrown in. Last year,



they let us make some basic runes. Nothing offensive mind you. It was just a bunch of rocks that glowed, dinged, or radiated happiness. Looney's end of term project was a combination of four runes that caused temporary purple hair growth and a tickling charm. I was shooting for magenta, but it came out more purple. I called it 'The Joy of Hair'. Professor Thorton found it amusing enough for best in class. A shame I couldn't make the hair last more than five minutes, otherwise everybody would have gone to dinner with long purple hair.

From what Padma and Lisa were saying about the OWL, the written one was just more translating and usage. The practical consisted of a charging rune, controlling rune, two tempus runes and two different lumos runes. The goal was to construct a basic nightlight, which would turn off a regular light spell at a certain time and turn on the weak light spell. Sixth year, we're supposed to do more basic household stuff, size expansion, air freshening and such. Only in the seventh year do they teach defensive warding like what you are doing. From what I heard, the house elves are instructed to check for wards and such in the fifth year and above dorms and if the students are caught setting up wards that could injure a student, they are disciplined.

So, in summary, you haven't missed too terribly much unless you really wanted to read Beowulf in the original script. I thought the 7th century one was better, but the original 5th century one written in Early Norse has much more magic in it. Did you know that there is at least one theory that Merlin was really Beowulf's last apprentice Wiglaf? Daddy rather likes that one. One of our part time writers on the Quibbler put out a very well thought out story linking the two from what little is known about them.

I'd love to hear more about the wards you are doing. Ginny once told me that you had your heart set on being an auror. Is that still true? They left for that other place already. That's all for now, please fill in the blank with your form below.

Yours,

Luna

A second short entry is below it.

Harry,

Now on to a more serious subject – the box I received today from a certain he-who-must-not-be-found. First and foremost I love the shirt with the squirrel on it. It is by far one of the coolest presents I have ever been given. Thank you very much. The other knickknacks are great too! I do have to ask you about some of the brochures you sent me. One had a little game of Dodgespell being played on it. I had to use a magnifying glass to watch it, but it was as interesting as you described.

I was particularly interested by the pamphlet for the Live Nude Review and Veela Follies. Although several of the pamphlets indicated ‘What happens here – stays here ... or gets obliterated,’ I have to ask, ‘What exactly did you say you did in Vegas, again?’ I can’t recall.

Anyway, I barely managed to get that one out of Daddy’s view in time along with several others that were shall we say different. I’m not sure even Looney would have a use for some of those products or services!

Unless of course, you did want me to order some of the things from a few of the more interesting catalog brochures? If so, it is rather presumptuous on your part! If that was flirting on your part, you might want to refine your technique. What exactly are you trying to say with this?

Luna

Oh shit! You remember grabbing a stack of brochures of things to do in Vegas at the Portkey terminal to fill the box up! You figured that they would have all kinds of ‘Looney’ material in them. Shit! Shit! Shit! What the fuck did you send her?

Dear Luna,

I am so sorry for not looking at the brochures. I was at the Portkey terminal and had some room left in the box. I grabbed one of each off the shelf and tossed them in figuring they had a whole bunch of weird things you could use as 'Looney'. I really didn't look at them, but I probably should have. I am sorry and I hope it did not offend you more than you let on. Please forgive me!

I swear I was not flirting with you. I have no intentions of flirting with you.

My Vegas experience consisted of hiding in a bathroom stall and listening to two bounty hunters talk about the good and the bad of not finding me in Vegas. Someone knows I am not in England. Right now I am recovering from my wounds in a battle with some rogue goblins and trolls. They are in the valley where the second site we are checking out is. I got banged up, but I'm okay now. So did a couple of other people. We're back in town and safe. So don't worry. The fight made the whole DoM thing look like playtime. I was all angry and afraid that night. Yesterday, I was more in control, but it was chaos. It might not make sense, but I hope you never have to understand what I am talking about.

I'll end this letter here and hope I haven't ruined our friendship. If it were safe for me to do so, I would go get an International Portkey and offer my apologies in person. You deserve no less.

Sincerely,

Harry

You close the book angry with yourself. Luna must think you are some kind of deviant pervert! You try some mind clearing exercises. You feel like splinching your leg and charming it to kick your stupid asre! Five hours until you can even get an answer. Two and a half hours for your message to get there and the same to get back. You don't feel like eating, but you ring the house elf and get some food anyway. Keeping an eye on the time, you dig out the 'Enhancing Wards With Other Wards' book that Bill gave you and start looking for growth and flammable runes. You eat lightly and get three different runes for growth and five for fire - fifteen different variations. Time to

start carving lots of fletcher wards. You're probably going to need to get out and get more base carving stone tomorrow.

You've managed to three fletcher runes by the time five hours elapses. You're getting much quicker at them. Each one took about an hour. You keep looking over at the journal to see if it will glow to signify that she is writing. You ruin a block of stone because you're too anxious. You're out of stone. You start to grab some Dragonbone, but decide against it. No more carving for you right now. You pull out a book and sit at the small writing desk and keep one eye on the book and one on the journal.

The book glows twenty minutes later.

Dear Harry,

I understand. You don't like me like that. I had hoped

You watch each letter form on the page almost like watching her write it. You reread it a couple of times to make sure it says what you think it says. The words stop for a full minute and then smear a bit. Why would she think you don't like her? Suddenly it hits you like a castle wall, her writing is all smeared because she is crying – was crying. You watch as the sentence is scribbled out, but is still barely legible. Finally a big black blot appears and spread out. She must have poured ink on it! Holy basket of house elf eggs! Luna likes you! What do you do now?

Dear Harry,

I just got your apology. I was in such a hurry to write back that I spilled some ink on the page. Oh clumsy me! It's still early in the morning. I got up to get a glass of water and saw that you had written. I accept your apology. I'm glad you and the rest of the expedition are okay. Please be careful out there. I didn't think poorly of you. You're special Harry. I am lucky to be your friend.

Just a quick note for now. I do want to hear more about the battle and the warding you are learning. Right now, I'm not feeling so good. I'm going to go back to bed.

Goodnight,

Luna

What a mess! She likes you! You reread your letter to her looking for what set this off. Your eyes settle on the line where you say you have no intentions of flirting with her. You were just trying to reassure her that you weren't a perv! You really know how to follow one fuckup with another dontcha? Okay Potter, deep thinking time – what are you going to write back? You're probably her only real friend and look how you treat her! No wonder she pretends to be someone else!

So, what do you want to do here? You could ignore the whole ink thing and just write her friendly letters. She's a strong girl. You could make it up to her. Everything would be fine, wouldn't it?

No, it wouldn't. She'd feel like shit and you'd be a Malfoy. All right, Potter make this right. Fix this now! You always talk about how your friends fucked you over. Step up and be a friend. Do what is right and if this means groveling, then grovel.

Dear Luna,

I find I have a new talent – creating messes and causing problems. I was so worried about my screw up damaging our friendship, that I wrote something that hurt you even more. I'm sorry. I can't say that enough. I was waiting for your reply and hoping that I had lost one of the few friends I had left. I watched your 'ink accident' happen.

I didn't think in a million years you might like me and here I am saying I would never flirt with you. You have every right to, hell I don't know – hate me, call me an insensitive prat, draw animated pictures of my getting beaten by Malfoy and his goons. I deserve it.

What this idiot is trying to say is that you are a good friend. I hated the idea of you not wanting to be my friend. You are special too, don't forget that! I don't think I am boyfriend material right now. Things are just too complicated. Two of the most powerful wizards in the world want me. One wants me dead and out of the way. The other wants

me under his thumb. I don't have much to offer and you deserve better than that. Bollocks! I don't even know if and when I am coming back to England.

That said if I do come back and things are less complicated, or I'm better equipped to deal, I wouldn't mind trying to get to know you in that way. Right now, I can't picture myself being serious about a girl who isn't already my friend. At the moment, I am still discovering my new wonderful friend Luna. I've heard she is a scorching blonde Hottie! She's witty, funny and apparently able to put me in my place at a moment's notice.

I'll fix my previous statement. I'll never flirt with you if it is going to ruin our friendship. I am sorry that I hurt you and hope you forgive me.

Yours,

Harry

Hoping you mended a fence or at least stopped it from collapsing further, you close the journal. After a light breakfast, you head over to Thundercloud's room.

"Good morning, Thundercloud. How's the leg?"

"It hurts. I was trying to get away from the firebat swarm. I attempted a rather risky maneuver. I came out of my form right before landing, so I could apparate away faster. Twenty years ago, it wouldn't have been a problem. My leg was still changing shape as I attempted to put weight on it and the bone broke. Now, how is it you ended up in your form last night against my advice?"

You mutter your apology, "Sorry about that. I stopped to help Collins and two jackals knocked me off my broom. I lost my wand and didn't have any other choice."

"Your actions are understandable, but now you know why it is important to make peace with the animal within you. Today, we are going to meditate. We are going to try to get to the memories of you in your animal form. If we succeed, we will put them in William's

pensieve and view them. It is a very effective tool to watch yourself function in your animal form. Seeing the way you move and fight will help you to achieve clarity sooner. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Show me what you want me to do.”

For the next four hours, Thundercloud walks you through a meditative hypnosis. The mug – err norms call it regression techniques. Your actions as a Jaguar are much less hazy now. Gah! How many times did you play snack on the goblin anyway? Withdrawing the memories, you put them into Fleur’s family pensieve. Watching it was an experience in itself. Parts were still hazy and seemed to skip, but now you have seen your animal form in action. The eagle tells you that when clarity comes, you will still feel the animal urges and you may even feel them at times in your human form.

“You speak like your human form is just another form?”

“They are equal. The human body does not define you any more. Your animal body does not define you. You are more than the two of them. The sooner you accept this, the quicker you will start on your path that leads to the truth about yourself?”

“What is the truth about you?”

“I am still on the path. Perhaps in my final moments, I will reach my destination. Go and get some rest. We will work more later.”

A reply is waiting for you in the journal. You wonder how badly you’ve messed up this time.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for replying. It cheered me up. I did read too much into your statement and I accept your apology, but only if you accept my apology for being a bit too sensitive. I’ll take you up on that becoming better friends thing. If anything happens after that we’ll see. I am going to pretend you never saw that little ink accident and SO ARE YOU! How’s that?

I did notice that you neglected to fill in the blank with your animagus form. Feel free to complete it at this time.

Yours,

Luna

On a whim, you scribble Crumple Horned Snorkack in the blank she provided and draw a couple of smiley faces next to it. Telling her now would be too easy. She's going to have to guess.

The next two days pass in a blur. The goblins agreed to Bill's ideas. You are taking thirty goblins and four trolls with your attack group. You feel much better. The letters from Luna have returned to their playful chattiness. There has been no mention of the ink incident since. Her last guess on your form was flobberworm. She spent two whole paragraphs telling you how cool you could be as a flobberworm. Borrowing from someone you met, you respond that you might be or know an alpaca animagus, being able to grow your own wool is cool! She's a little worried about you going into a goblin den, even with all this back up. You told her about the battle finishing with 'and then I turned into my supercool animagus form. Who'd have thought that goblins on Worg would be scared of a firecrab, but my claws really chased them off!' In response she drew a little animated drawing of a half-ferret half-Malfoy smashing a firecrab with a mallet that looked a good deal like the squirrel on the shirts.

Thundercloud and you continue your training. Unable to perform your usual destructive and mostly painful training, Kwan instead starts teaching you basic first aid and wound closure. He's cut back on the stupid comments merely reminded you that having a great power, but not the ability to use it is – stupid. He knows occulmency as well and shows you a few of his techniques for meditation.

On the cursebreaking front, you helped complete the two Sappers. They are ready to go. Bill spent more of your money getting additional overpriced, premade wards to replace the ones used at the campsite. Between the store bought ones and the carvings they've done in the meantime, the expedition is capable of defending the camp again. In what little spare time Bill's had, he has looked at your work on



Flaming Spears of Death. You've got all the fletcher runes and the growth runes carved. Seven of the fifteen incinerating runes are now done. Of the first five you tried so far, one scheme worked, but the flaming spears weren't nearly as large as the ones created by you and Collins. One sputtered out a single arrow and a lot of smoke. Two, of them did nothing at all except discharge a magical aura and crumble into dust. The last one exploded violently. Bill shielded you from the results – good thing too! Even with a successful scheme, Bill insisted you try the rest to see if any of them give better results than the single working scheme. Designing a new rune is meticulous and repetitive work. There is a good deal of trial and more than a bit of error. Luna is fascinated by your rune design. She asks for the titles of the books you are using.

So here it is Friday, August Second. You never made it over to Karina's. Let's just keep the female messes to a minimum for the time being, shall we? You are standing in a conference room with dozens of goblins, your companions and four trolls. The war party is set to go. Thundercloud provided the location of the lair and they are discussing how best to attack the entrance and the possible layout of the goblin warren below ground. Not being the strategist, you mill around trying not to look fidgety or anxious.

"Puny James!" A massive troll hand thunks you on your back. You're not really in touch with your feminine side, but he could use good washing, perhaps a manicure, even better, gloves or best of all a different place to put his hands!

You smile despite your sudden bout of the woolies. "Hey Hack, it's good to see you. How's your game of Plunk? Are you getting all the troll girls?"

Hack smiles. His toothy maw turning into a big grin. Add a toothbrush and a case of toothpaste to Hack's Christmas gift bag. "Hack win plunk. Hack gets all the troll girls. All of them want Hack now!"

"That's good. I'm glad you'll be out there with us."

"Hack glad to be fighting. Need to get away from troll girls. Hack glad to fight with puny James! Crush lots of skulls."

“Wouldn’t you rather stay here with the troll girls?” It seems like a good question. In Hack’s place you’d rather stay with a bunch of females who can’t get enough of you.

“No. Hack’s dick hurt.”

Well you asked – and you think you have girl problems!

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Author’s notes – Hope you enjoyed it. Full discussion on Darklordpotter; see the link in my profile. I hope you didn’t get busted at work or school laughing.

Disclaimer – Everyone has problems. Your problem is that Harry Potter and his Universe (that's still cool to have your own Universe – isn't it?) is owned by someone with the initials JKR.

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## Chapter 14 – Well, That's All Right by Me

“James! James Black!”

Oh wait, that's you, idiot! You just came out of the local branch of Gringotts into the evening. Bill and the rest were still working with the head goblins. You're pretty much useless at the whole planning and strategy thing. You'd probably turn down quidditch captain even if the ruddy bastards had offered it to you. It's Katie's year anyway. You'd take it if it were Ron's, just so you could justify tossing his worthless arse from the team. Makes you wonder if Hermy Funbags will discover that his 'performance problems' aren't just limited to the quidditch pitch? Well instead of playing make believe and humiliating an imaginary Ron, you should find out who is calling you and what they want.

“I thought you didn't hear me for a second.” Paulo Vangelder walks briskly up next to you. That answers the first question – now for the more important question.

“Oh sorry, it's been a long day. Hello, Paulo. How are you?” You try to make your banter sound casual. For a change it might be working.

“I've been looking for you. I'm a bit worried about Karina and her boy.” Paulo says in hushed tones. The Brazilian law enforcement official is probably six feet tall and solidly built. He keeps his dark hair very short and has a friendly enough face.

Still a little unsure of your place in Karina's life or more importantly, hers in your's, you respond, “What have you been hearing?”

“My distant cousin Nina seems to be on a warpath. I am risking a bit just being seen with you, so we may need to start acting angry towards each other. She is becoming more obsessed with Karina. She might even come after you, if she thinks that she can get away with it.”

“Why me? Even better, why do you care so much?” You’re getting more and more suspicious these days.

“James, please do not insult me. Her neighbors are in Nina’s pocket. They’ve been telling her about how much time you have been spending over there. They saw you and your friend ward her house. The magical community here is small. It’s nowhere near the size of Sao Paulo or Brazilia. Gossip is just another form of currency around here. As for why I care, Karina is my friend. I don’t like seeing things like this happen to my friends.”

Okay, that’s a bit annoying and a rather generic answer if you’ve ever heard one, “I can take care of myself.”

“I never meant to imply that. I am concerned with Karina’s safety. Have you seen her lately?”

“I haven’t seen her since last weekend. Is there something wrong?”

“No, at least I don’t think so. I stop by and see her morning. I figured you might have visited since then. Are you going to see her now?”

You hadn’t planned on it. The attack is set for Saturday at dusk, but then again you can’t just go blabbing to the small town police officer that you and your merry bunch of tomb raiders are teaming up with some goblins to go hunt down a group of rebels. Especially when said rebels are operating out of an area that you and the aforementioned tomb raiders are looking to pillage. You’ve got about fourteen hours to kill. The attack is just an excuse for you not really wanting to face up to an awkward situation with Karina. The irony isn’t lost on you is it? The prospect of tunnels full of goblins and fierce fighting is less scary than a single mother and her five year old boy.

"I was considering it. Then again, it has been a rough week. Maybe I should wait until tomorrow."

Paulo looks you over. You wonder if he is jealous of your relationship with Karina. "James, go see her. She is scared, more than she let's on. She's barely leaving the house and never lets Chico out of her sight. If my cousin thought about it, she would let this go on for another few months and watch Karina go crazy. Fortunately she's not that smart."

"Isn't there something you can do?" Speaking of which, how does everything ultimately become your problem? Is there some kind of process? You half expect to see Vernon on the telly one day telling everyone that global warming and mad cow disease are all Harry Potter's fault. The only reason Vernon isn't higher on the must-kick-arse list is that Dumblecrap and Voldishit occupy the number one and two slots.

"There is too much money and influence involved. My hands are pretty much tied." Wow! Who would have guessed that answer? Isn't it amazing how jaded you are becoming? Still, Paulo is trying to help as best he can. You should give him a break.

"You're right. I should go see her."

"I'm glad. I know you are gone during the week, but how can I get in touch with you if something happens?"

You give the name of the hotel out in town you normally stay at to him and let him know that you are staying at the Dancing Dolphin right now. He gives you his floo address. For a few more minutes you make some small talk. He invites you to another Dodgespell tournament coming up in a few weeks. You can't really accept or decline. Two weeks in your life is a ways away. You need only look at where you were three weeks ago and see how different your life has been. You ask about Reese, Sheila and Amanda. Your former teammates are doing okay according to Paulo, though he doesn't expect Reese and Sheila to remain a couple much longer. With small talk wearing thin, you shake his hand and watch him apparate away.

With a crack you apparate to Karina's street and send an announcing charm to Karina's door. You see her face at the window and wave. She beckons you forward. You feel the slight tingle of the perimeter ward as you pass through it. Strange, you're keyed to it, so it doesn't matter. From what you read, she should have dropped it out of courtesy. You look to see if any of the other wards start to activate, but she opens the door.

"James, please come inside."

Karina looks frazzled. Like she hasn't been sleeping well. Given your vast experience in sleep disorders, you are well trained to recognize them in others. You step into her home and she closes the door and sags into it momentarily before recovering her composure.

"Why didn't you drop the perimeter ward?"

"Paulo said I shouldn't. People could be using glamours or polyjuice, but they can't fake your magical signature. Since you didn't set off the perimeter ward, I know it's you." Damn! She is freaking out isn't she? Paulo's right. A few weeks of this and she'll turn into Moody with a nice bum.

"Oh. That makes sense. Are you okay?"

No sooner do you squeeze those words out than she is in your arms sobbing. Hey, it's the return of Cho! Then again, Karina has real problems. The biggest one Cho ever had is a bloke she was hung up on was in the wrong place at the wrong damn time. You do the time honored 'guy with crying girl hugs her and pats her on the back'. Over her shoulder you see Chico standing in his doorframe. The poor kid doesn't understand. Not that you have much of a clue either, but your heart goes out to him. He gives you a sad smile and a tiny wave. You motion for him to go back into his room and he nods with a look of 'make my mama stop crying or else'.

"Calm down. Do you want to talk about it?" You cast a silencing spell at Chico's door. She sees what you are doing.

“Calm down! Calm Down! I can't live like this! People are watching me. I've seen them. My neighbors keep having people over. I think I've seen them before with the Colastos family. It's like they are torturing me, but you walk right in and say calm down! You have no idea!”

You could come back at her. It's not like you haven't lived the past few years under a fucking microscope or something with people intent on causing you a ridiculous amount of bodily harm. She's had a couple weeks of this treatment. You almost want to scream at her, but you bite it back. “Karina, get a hold of yourself. If you keep doing this, they've already won. Going around the twist isn't going to help. If they come you activate Bill's wards. You get Chico out of here. It's that simple.”

“And go where?”

“I don't know. Don't you have relatives you can go see?”

She clutches you even harder. “I have no one except for my Chico. I would leave and never come back, could you help me? I'm not too proud to beg. James, please help me!”

The crappy thing is that you and Bill have had a discussion after the recent splurging on pre-made wards for the camp. Remus had been writing in the Bill's journal and wondering about all the recent drafts against the Phoenix Expedition funds. Bill had to do some fancy writing to justify the amount of your money he has been spending lately. The two of you agreed that you should limit spending to limit the amount of questions.

“Karina, I can only draw so much against my trust funds. How much do you need?”

“I would need to leave the country. I would need papers, a portkey and a place to go. The papers are expensive. It would cost around a hundred galleons for both of us. I don't know about the rest. Paulo said he might be able to use his connections to get me the papers quietly, but it might cost more. If she heard that I was leaving I know she would tell them to kill us.”

You know Bill wouldn't go for it. After the five hundred for the animagus ritual, the fines from warding this place, all the extra wards and equipment, and the extra money most of the team demanded after learning your identity there was no way!

"Karina, it's too much. I can't access that money right now."

Her demeanor shifts quickly, "Can't or won't?" She does have a quick temper doesn't she?

"Can't. I'm only allowed to access so much money."

"Take us with you."

That's a rather stunning statement. "Karina, the jungle is no place for a kid like Chico."

"I'll cook. I'll clean. If I stay here, they will kill both of us. I'd rather take our chances with you out in the jungle." Parts of her argument sound familiar to your conversation with Bill to let you come on this little adventure.

You stop to think this over. Kwan would call you 'stupid' for even considering it. Still, it wouldn't be too many more mouths to feed. Thundercloud would be okay with it. Collins and Sanchez would probably demand more money for childcare services or some such shit! Still the only person whose opinion matters right now is Bill. Bill's a family guy. It's really big to him, even if you don't much care for his family at the moment.

"I'll speak to Bill. He's leading the expedition. We're headed out tomorrow, and I know he won't go for immediately. I'll have to convince him, but he I think he understands. We're not due to head back to England until October. Even then there might be some problems, but if he agrees we can try to get you out of the country and settled somewhere else. I can't make any promises other than I will try."



She sees the sincerity in your eyes. You don't mention bringing her to England and you really hope that she isn't assuming that. With some luck, you can speak with Thundercloud and see if he can take her back to South Dakota. You are willing to bet Karina would trade places with Lauren in a heartbeat. 'Hmm, Karina and Lauren – no you idiot, don't even go there!'

"Forgive me James! I am expecting you to solve all my problems! I have no right to do this to you!" Damn! She's blubbing all over you again. You ease back against the wall and support her weight letting her collapse into you, which she does readily.

You give her a couple of minutes to get a good cry in while working your hands in small circles on her back. "Karina, I'll do my best with Bill. He's a good man."

The water works gradually fade away as you continue to hold her. After a few minutes, other emotions start to take over. "James, I know you will. You are a good man. I am sorry I got angry with you. Let me make it up to you." Her kisses are wet and slightly salty. You can smell her scent. You shouldn't be doing this right now. It's wrong, but it feels right. After a minute of passionate kisses and roaming hands, she steps back and performs the contraception charm and a second silencing charm on Chico's door. "Take me."

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Suffice to say, a little over an hour later you are kicking yourself in your arse. There is a naked, exhausted Karina Machado sleeping in your arms. Sleeping with her was probably the last thing you should have done at this point! As you look back at your actions, you begin to realize that you need to speak with Thundercloud about the animal side 'bleeding over' to your human side. From the moment she said 'Take me!' you were out of control. Intense is probably the only way to describe what happened. The problem is, you know it shouldn't have happened. Not only have you paid this woman for sex, but you basically just took advantage of her at her weakest!

You ease her off of you and grab all your hastily shed clothing and clean yourself up in the bathroom. As you dress, you flinch a bit at the

claw marks on your back. Apparently, she picked up on the intensity as well. Sitting at the kitchen table with accusing eyes is Chico. You cast a silencing spell around Karina and apply the translation spell since you know Chico wants something.

“Hey Chico. Your mama is sleeping. Do you need something?”

“Can I have a glass of water?” Well at least it isn’t the ‘are you going to be my daddy’ question and it’s easily enough solved.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you, Mr. Black. Mama’s been really mad lately. She cries a lot. She thinks that bad men are going to come and take me.”

“She’s worried. Here let me give you something.” You take Thundercloud’s little rope anklet off of your foot and put it on his wrist where it shrinks to fit. “Chico this has a tracking charm on it. If somebody comes and takes you, I can use my wand to find you. Just don’t tell anyone about it, okay? This will be our little secret. Now you need to be a good boy and be strong for your Mum. She’s counting on you. Can you do that for me?” You cast the charm to set the tracking spell to your wand as he watches on.

The little boy nods eagerly and stares at his new little rope bracelet. Thundercloud can make a new one for you. You shoo him back to his room. Life shouldn’t be this complicated should it? You stare at the peacefully resting form of Karina. ‘Shit, Harry! What in the hell are you doing? To make matters worse, you didn’t let anyone know where you went off too. Bill’s gonna be ticked.’

You decide to wake her up before you go. You feel guilty, but leaving a note felt wrong on so many levels. Giving her a gentle shake, “Karina, I have to go. Karina.”

She comes to, a bit wonky at first. ‘Nothing like a bit of an ego boost for your improving skills you miserable sack of shit!’ “James? What is it?”

"I'm sorry. I have to go. We are headed back into the jungle tomorrow, well actually today and I have to get back."

"When are you coming back?"

That's a really good question. "Bill hasn't said if we will come back before next Friday. As soon as we come back, I'll bring Bill over and we'll talk it over. Try to get some rest."

She manages a weak smile, nods and gives you a kiss that generates a nice pang of guilt. You walk to the edge of the road and apparate away feeling lower than dirt. You arrive about fifty meters from the Dancing Dolphin. When you get to your room, there's a note on the door.

Cookie,

Since you can't seem to follow verbal instructions, I'll try written. I'll even use small and easy to understand words. When you decide to go somewhere, MAKE DAMN SURE YOU TELL SOMEONE! Now come over to my room so I can chew you out in person.

William Weasley

Expedition Leader (In case you had forgotten)

With a sigh you head over to Bill's room for the reaming you deserve.

"Good morning, Cookie." Bill says setting aside his chisel, hammer and the runes he was carving. He looks a bit angry as he wipes some dust off his face. He's been hard at work, apparently.

"Hello Bill. You're letter mentioned something about coming over."

"Indeed it did. So should I just lay in to you, or wait for a suitable explanation?" Well, at least he is giving you options.

"Karina's in trouble. I ran into Paulo. He says that people have been harassing her. She thinks that crazy bitch is going to come after her

and Chico. You all were still in with the goblins and I didn't think to come back here and leave a note."

Bill mulls this over. "So what's she going to do?"

Taking a deep breath, "She's scared, Bill. She wants us to take her and Chico on the expedition, or give her money to get out of the country. I told her that I am limited at how much I can withdraw from my trust funds. I don't want to push things with Dumbledore's crowd any more than we have already."

"And what did you promise her?"

"Nothing. Only that I would talk to you about it. I'm not keen on taking a five year old into the jungle. Hell, you had your doubts about me. Still, I was thinking, we could surround the clearing with an age line and it would keep him from getting out beyond the wards. Karina said she'd take over cleaning and cooking."

"It could work, but Harry, my gut says this is a very bad idea. I'll think about it. When did you say you'd give her an answer?"

"Next time we came back into town. I didn't mention the whole hunting goblins thing. If we don't get rid of them, the whole thing is moot anyway."

"Fair enough. We kill goblins first and sort this rubbish out later."

"Thanks Bill. Sorry about not leaving a note."

"Harry, remember you're part of a team. This isn't like being a seeker. You know people are after you. Just because we've fooled the Headmaster, it doesn't mean that whoever sent those bounty hunters after you will be so easily tricked. You need to stay on the top of your game at all times. If Moody were here, he'd be shouting all that 'Constant Vigilance' and whatnot. We don't need problems with the locals. If it wasn't for Remus looking really hard at what we're spending, I'd just say give her the money and let her get out of the country on her own."

“I understand. We’ll sort it out after the goblins are dead.”

“So are you tired?”

“Not really.”

“Good, grab your carving kit and at least five pieces of bone. If I can get you to carve the charging and controlling runes for this, I can move on to the next scheme. I’ll show Sanchez exactly where she can stick those man-eating plants. Teach her to try to show me up.”

You shake your head and start back to your room. “I really didn’t need that imagery.”

His fanatical look has returned. This has really gotten to him hasn’t it? You might want to reconsider Harry Potter the Animagus Cursebreaker thing. You could end up like Bill, obsessing and muttering about some equally crazy Mexihag.

A quick trip back to the room and you’re back with you kit. “Alright, come here and look at this! I haven’t named it yet, but this part creates a big rock, this part banishes it, this part makes it chase you, and this part – I still haven’t decided what it’s going to do, but it’ll be great! Should I make it grow spikes? Nah, that’d slow it down. Fire! Fire always makes it better! Or an age line! You mentioned that. Maybe have an age line pop up set to two hundred years old, so they can’t run away.”

You quickly realize that it is going to be a long night of carving.

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With the setting sun as the backdrop, the assault force moves through the jungle. The Portkeys dropped you off about a kilometer away from the tunnel entrance. The rest of the group is waiting on Thunderclouds report. You move up to Collins, noticing he has a machine gun in his hands.

“What’s with the gun?”

“Goblins don’t have an answer for it. Unless they have a wizard down there who is casting bulletproof charms on their armor. An AK-47 will drop one just as effectively as an AK from my wand. Tunnel fighting is messy and dirty. I’ve even got a little silencing charm and a reloader on this baby, that I can toggle on and off.”

One of the first witches to ever receive a unanimous Order of Merlin from the male dominated ICW was Ariel Cloudrider. In the late 1700’s, after losing her husband and family to what Arthur Weasley called ‘firelegs’, she set to the task of crafting the first set of bullet repellant charms. Over the years her work has been refined as the non-magical worlds weapons have improved. You doubt they’ll ever come close to something that would stop a nuclear bomb, but a relatively simple applied to runes sewn into clothing or carved into armor can stop most handheld pistols and even some rifles.

“Why would you want to take the silencing charm off?”

“This is an assault rifle. It makes a loud and terrifying sound. If you want them scared shitless, this will do nicely.”

“Oh, that makes sense. I just was surprised to see a wizard with a rifle. Will it stop a troll?”

Collins looks at the weapon critically. “It has in the past. Took most of clip to do it, before you ask, it won’t hurt a giant or a dragon unless you are really lucky where you hit it. I wouldn’t even bother. Ya wanna learn how to shoot? Kwan’s already showing you all our nasty spellchains, but I’m better with a gun.”

“Sure, why not?” In your mind, you create and savor the mental image of Voldishit riding in the limo, while you play Lee Harvey Oswald. “That reminds me, you’re from Texas right?”

“Born American – Texan by the grace of Gawd!” His drawl becomes almost intolerable for some reason.

“Did the American Minister of Magic really order Kennedy’s death, because he was going to reveal the magical world?”

He just smiles at you. "No one will ever say, but the Norms kept talking about a 'magic bullet'. Makes ya wonder don't it?"

You nod at the Hitwizard and make your way over to the others. Bill is with the lead goblin. You consider most of them to be grizzled looking. Fourfangs is a particularly ancient and grizzled specimen. He might even be the 'Mad Eye' of the goblin nation! The plan is for the wizards to clear away the traps and such and leave the majority of the fighting to the goblins and trolls. The plan suits you just fine and dandy. From what little information you have about these rebels is that their leader is a female. According to Binns, the goblins treat their females like dirt. It's surprising that one has risen to become a clan leader. You may be helping to kill the goblin equivalent of Joan of Arc.

The funny thing is you used to get all those bouts of nerves waiting for a quidditch match to start. It all seems so small and childish in comparison. That was just some game. In a few minutes from now, the killing begins. This is what you meant, when you told Luna that you hope she never understands. It's one thing to defend yourself, your home, or your campsite; but it is another thing altogether to go somewhere with the sole purpose of killing your enemy. You pace nervously. A hand touches your shoulder and stops you.

"Wasting energy is stupid! Save energy for killing goblins." Kwan's really cutting down on his use of the word stupid isn't he? Does that mean that you are getting smarter or he's just getting bored?

You look at the Korean Hitwizard. He's probably in his late forties or early fifties. "Never really sat around waiting to kill something before. It takes some getting used to. How do you do it?" No wonder most of the Death Eaters are fucking whack jobs!

"Clear your mind. Focus on the task at hand. Remind yourself, that if you are slow and stupid, that you will never see your friends and family again. Never underestimate opponents. Be fast. Be smart. Hope you are lucky. Keep yourself alive first. Kill enemies second. Help allies third."

You don't really have an answer for that, but it makes you wonder. "But if that's the case, why did you tell Bill to get on my broom in the ruins first?"

Kwan smiles at you. It's probably the first real 'warm' smile, you've seen from him. "Even I am stupid and foolish occasionally."

"Any advice for fighting in the tunnels?"

"Stay on the sides. Never move in the center of the tunnel at first. Goblins trap center of tunnel. Later on they trap sides of tunnel. Use cover wherever you can find it. Keep a bezoar in your mouth. If you feel like you've been hit, swallow bezoar. Don't bother trying to figure out if it was or was not poisoned. Blasting spells cause tunnel to collapse. No tree splitters! Use cutters and piercing spells. If tunnel is really dark, throw your big stunner. Bright red light will hurt their eyes. Don't look at your own spells. Move as soon as you throw one. Bright light might hurt them, but it also tells them where you are. Time to go now."

Sure enough you watch Thundercloud land and smoothly transform back into his human form. Your mental exercises have brought you closer to clarity, but you're still not there yet. He enchanted another bracelet so he could track you in the event your animal takes you on a walkabout. You watch as he reports to Bill and the ancient goblin.

"Kwan, you and Collins are going to take down the three guards at the entrance. There are probably at least one or two a few meters back into the corridor. They'll sound the alarm if they aren't killed quick enough. Kill them if you can, but don't risk going into the mouth of the cave until I figure out what wards they have. Fourfangs says this group uses a lot of golems and siege engines, so their tunnels and caves will be bigger. Hold at the entrance, while Sanchez and I drop the wards."

Bill stops and looks at you and all the creatures around you, "James, you're back here for the moment. If I signal you, bring that Sapper up, float it up. No, scratch that, keep a troll and five goblins back with you. They might have a concealed ambush hole. I need you to watch our backs. Thundercloud, you're with me and Sanchez. As soon as the



wards go down, the goblins and trolls are heading in. Each of the goblins are carrying Worg, but it's got a pigment in it to make them glow red. If it doesn't glow red, make it dead. Understand?"

You're a little miffed that your role is that of leading the rearguard, but you can deal with it. The five goblins don't seem to like it. Without their little suits on and with armor and axes, they look slightly more menacing. Call them bankers with attitude. Naturally, your five goblins look like the five that the others decided to leave behind.

The battle starts Kwan and Collins wipe out the ones at the front, but the ones down the tunnel set off some kind of alarm. Bill signals for the Sapper. You and Hack bring it up. You watch the Sapper activate. It's kind of a weird feeling having that many charging runes activate at once. It feels like the magic is being sucked right out of the air. Bill and Sanchez start their chants designed at bringing the outer wards down. You see a few of the schemes light up. You actually recognize the basic perimeter wards and intruder alarms. Feeling proud, you join in with your only anti-ward chant that Bill has taught you so far. It basically forces your energy against the energy of the wards until the controller rune fails. It's useful against wards that don't fight back like alarms, but there's always the danger of cascade activation if the intruder wards are connected to something larger.

The wards appear to be rather amateurish. That is to say that you could've done them. The witch or wizard the goblins employed clearly wasn't topshelf. The amount of ambient power in the area is what is keeping them up. The Sapper interrupts that chain and within a minute the perimeter alarms and first series of wards, which were mostly pain and nausea inducers fall. A few crossbow bolts fly out the cave's entrance. Collins answers with a full clip of his AK-47 with the silencing charm turned off. Oddly enough, no further crossbow bolts come out of the cave.

The first group of ten goblins and two trolls enters followed by Bill, Kwan, Collins and two trolls. Fifteen goblins enter next with Sanchez and the other troll. Soon it is just you, five angry looking goblin runts and Hack standing near the entrance of the cave, while the sounds of battle reach your ears. If you thought waiting for the battle to start was nerve-wracking, it has been quickly replaced with no knowing

what is going on. The ground shakes beneath you and there is rumbling noise. You hope that is intentional.

For five long minutes you wait with nothing to do. You drum your wand against the palm of your hand while listening to the goblins converse in their language. One of them starts pointing madly as other goblins begin emerging from the brush. About ten of them are in their normal form and probably ten more are in worg form with half of those being bears. As they fire their crossbows, you cast a quick counter.

“Vertexicis!” A strong gust of wind sends the crossbow bolts off their mark. It was strong enough to send several goblins and smaller worgs back into the underbrush. Note to self – Make more food that Thundercloud likes. Bribe him to teach more elemental magic.

You sight the first bear and unleash Tonare, Lacerus and Impactus on it with devastating results. Hack steps in front of you and eats a cutter with his shield. The troll shrugs off the spell like it was nothing. Their wizard must be out here! Your goblins rush forward and engage. Damnation! You frantically try to cover them. No wonder the others left these five out here! They’re idiots! Hack is the smallest of the trolls, but what really bugs you is that your expedition left you out here. What does that say about you?

As you cast another cutter in defense of one your out numbered goblins and summon a snake. Ducking away from a blasting curse that sends a wave of dirt into the air. You direct the snake, “Kill the animals!”

You begin hurling a stream of spells at all the goblins. Once again, you hate the fact that you don’t have a snake of your own. The creature store in town had two Bushmasters for sale, but Bill’s spending freeze got in the way! With your luck, if you told it to kill the goblins it would attack the ones with you. Naturally, this brings up another point as you snap a shield up deflecting a bludgeoning curse from the wizard in the underbrush – exactly which goblins are your goblins? You concentrate on the worgs coming at you. Hack is fighting against three bears. You fire a gout of fire at the two boars and a jackal charging you. One boar makes it through and you banish

the shit out of it. You have to admit Collins' joke about pigs flying is a bit humorous.

Your good humor is interrupted by a bludgeoner, which makes it past the shield you were trying to cast. Like a solid thunk to the gut with a cricket bat, it doubles you over and slams you into the earthen walls surrounding the cave. Ow! No dragon hide protecting your bum! You see stars from the whiplash as the back of your head hits a split second after your arse. You roll around on the ground, trying to clear your head and make less of a Harry sized target. Well you probably needed to swallow that bezoar anyway. A pair of cutters digs into the rock behind you and that damn piggy you sent flying is coming back angry.

Sensing that fate has once again provided you the tools you require, "Wingardium Leviosa!" As Fleur would say, 'Voila, bouclier de cochon.' Using your floating pig shield, you block the next two curses while eliminating an enemy. It gives you time to shake off the effects of being bludgeoned. Feeling sufficiently ready to deal out some damage, you banish the worg carcass into one of the two bears still fighting Hack. Hack uses the distraction to club it with his rather crude looking spiked club.

It's a good thing you now feel up to it, because there are two goblins charging you. The one on the left has an axe. His counterpart has a sword. You dodge right and use the severing charm. Your aim was off. All it does is splash on his armor and slow him down for a second. The goblins sword smacks painfully into your Vipertooth armor. It doesn't give way, but you know there will be bruising. Making Dudders proud of you, goblin number one is rewarded with a crushing left handed uppercut backed by your dragonhide gauntlet. TKO for Potter! The armored midget spins to the ground. That punch over extended you and you pay the price as the other goblin's axe grazes your flesh slicing your left arm open.

Blood fuels your anger and you stab your wand in his face "Reducto!" The little sodding bastard's head pretty much disintegrates.

"Episkey!" The basic first aid spell closes the bleeding wound. Blood isn't flowing anymore, mostly it is just oozing now. Hack is in trouble!

The last bear is on his chest swiping at his face and he's taken some spell damage from the wizard.

You charge at the bear and scream, "Lacero!" The severing charm gets the bear's attention cutting into its furry leg. Hack feebly swats at the bear, but it's enough to knock it off his chest. A bone shattering spell slams into Hack's shoulder making the troll scream in agony, but barely missing his head. Hack struggles to rise, but then falls.

"Abrumpo per Incendia!" It's time for a fire whip. You lash it across its front legs. The bear rears howling in anger and you bring the whip across its chest. It staggers and you manage a lucky shot wrapping the whip around the creature's neck. Death claims it quickly.

Something, a reductor, a bludgeoner, or a blaster slams into your right side. You barely hold on to your wand as you are spun off your feet. It hurts. On a scale of one to ten, you would have to say 'very much so'. You suck in a breath. It doesn't feel like your lung inflated all the way and some of the ribs don't feel like they are where they should be. You switch your wand to your left hand and manage a protego, which stops the next spell. The wizard is advancing on you. He smells the kill. You block a second spell. This is a really bad situation you've got yourself into here isn't it? You need something to stop him in his tracks. You need something he can't block. You need something ... unforgivable.

"Crucio!" Thanks to Kwan, it's the one you have the most experience with and though good old Bella once told you that righteous anger isn't enough, you've had a chance to stockpile some additional hatred and anger in the interim. On this day, in this moment, against this foe, it is more than enough.

The wizard collapses in agony as you pour energy into the spell. You see Hack moving out of the corner of your eye. He's crawling towards the wizard. You struggle to maintain the spell long enough for Hack to drag his sixty or seventy stone frame over to the writhing wizard. As you release the spell, Hack brings his meaty paw down into the man's chest with a wet crack. He convulses once and then stops moving.

You manage to croak out, "Nice job, Hack! Crawl on over her!"

When the troll makes his way over to you, you make liberal use of epsikey and several other spells Kwan has shown you. You succeed in patching Hack's worst wounds. It's very tiring. You're cold and could use a nap right now. He helps you get your dragonhide off. The entire right side of your chest looks like Crabbe and Goyle decided to skip hitting bludgeoners at you and just decided to use their bats. What the fuck did that bastard hit you with?

"Puny James need to stay awake. Don't fall asleep!" To emphasize his point he pinches your leg. That'll bruise.

"Ow! Damn! Okay stay awake, I can do that. Still glad you came along?"

"Hack glad to fight with Puny James. We crush skulls together. Can't Puny James fix self with magic like he fix Hack?"

"Don't know the right spells." You mumble as you begin to shiver. Hack takes his damaged and blood soaked shirt off and covers you with it. It's a fantastic gesture, even if it smells like troll sweat, blood and old cheese. "Thanks, Hack."

"Stay warm Puny James. Hack will go for help. Get other wizards to fix Puny James. Stay awake!"

Hack runs off. You crawl over to the other wizard to check for a blood replenishing potion. You notice the wizard's eyes open. He gags and spits up blood. "I hate humans." You're pretty sure you heard that right. At least he doesn't have his wand anymore. It's about three meters away and neither of you look like your in any condition to go get it.

"So that's why you work for some 'down on her luck' renegade goblin bitch?"

"The only reason the clans didn't rise up was I wasn't a male!" The wizard hissed as he coughed up more blood. "I'll not die in this wretched body!"

You watch in fascination as the body shifts and turns into a female goblin. You've never seen one before. She's roughly the same size as a male. The features are softer and more feminine. That said, she's still ugly as sin. What hair she has is stringy and the eyes are a strange yellow color. "One day my kind will rise up. The matriarchy will free my kind from your oppression!"

"So, the goblin council didn't go for it because you are a female?" What an odd conversation this is. You're leaning on a rock draped in a troll's shirt having some parting words with a dying goblin anarchist.

She hacks out some more blood. "... slaves to your damn money. The centaurs understand. They know the truth. We're tolerated as long as we have use to you. Until we learn to be something more, we will always be your lapdogs."

You can actually identify with her. You mutter, "Sounds like the story of my life, sister. Keep up the good fight!" The two of you lock eyes. Hers open slightly in surprise as she dies. You wonder what universal truth she saw in her last seconds?

You do your best to stay awake. You recite at least twenty of Bill's 'Golden Rules of Cursebreaking' in your head. Closing your eyes would really be nice now. How long has Hack been gone? A minute? Ten?

A soft thumping can be heard. Is something coming? Is it just your heart ringing in your ears?

"Put me down!" You hear a voice scream and it breaks into a series of Spanish curses.

"Puny James hurt. Pretty witch fix Puny James. Puny James save Hack. Fix Puny James, NOW!"

You want to chuckle. Hack just called Sanchez pretty. Now that's funny, too funny. Does that mean Sanchez is pretty for a troll? You wouldn't have even given her that much credit. You drift off with that amusing thought on your mind as she forces some awful substance down your throat.

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You come to on a cot in the tent. It's dark outside. Thundercloud is sitting by you sleeping lightly. You're not dead. Well, if you are then soreness incurred on the living side carries over to the next. If that's the case you hope Voldecrap and Dumbleshit both die of flaming pokers up the arse.

Gingerly, you reach out and touch the Indian's hand. His eyes open up. "Welcome back, Harry. You were badly injured, when your troll friend dragged Sanchez back to you."

"Is everyone else okay? Where's my wand?" You don't really plan on casting spells, but you've got this possessive thing about your wand. Someone once told you that you could do 'great and terrible things' with such a wand.

"Relax. No one on the expedition sustained any lasting injuries. The worst was my concussion when the renegades tried to collapse part of the tunnel. It was you that fought and killed their leader."

"She looked like a wizard and was able to cast spells. How did she do that?"

"She wore an ancient armband of perhaps Mayan or even Atlantean make. Bill and Sanchez are studying it. It allows someone to assume another's shape and some of their abilities. Such bands were once used by Wizards to make magical folk into normal people and bestow the stolen magic on their minions. The effect was either temporary or could be made permanent through a ritual sacrifice of the victim."

Maybe because you were just waking up, but that didn't make any sense. "What do you mean?"

"The armband allowed the Goblin Chieftain to assume the form of a wizard that she captured and bound his power into the band by killing him. This was how she was able to cast spells."

“I’m surprised the goblins didn’t want it back. It sounds dead useful.” Well now you know who did the amateur warding job.

The old man smiled at you. “Bill’s agreement with them was for one quarter of the gold and any artifacts that were recovered. The goblins offered much of their share in exchange for it. Bill politely refused, but did allow them to purchase several other minor objects that were recovered as a gesture of solidarity.

“How long have I been out?”

“Hey! Cookie! We sure have missed you. None of us are worth a damn in the kitchen.” Bill’s voice booms. Collins mutters something about there being nothing wrong with his chili.

“Hey Bill! Next time leave a few more goblins with me, m’kay?”

“I’ll think about it. You got beat up pretty bad, considering it’s Monday night. The goblins arranged for a healer to be portkeyed out here to check on you. We obliterated him before he went back. You’re stuck in bed until Wednesday. Sanchez and I are working on the ruins. You’re troll buddy Hack asked to stay on. He’s outside on guard duty. I believe his exact words were ‘Hack not leave til James says so.’ Should I send out the wedding invites?”

“Bill, do me a favor – fuck off!”

“No can do, but I do have a present for you. Part of our haul included this. As your mentor and Cursebreaking guru extraordinaire, I am proud to bestow upon you your very own copy of ‘The Book’!”

Bill summons a copy of Golinard’s Field Cursebreaking Manual. “Sorry, I’ve already copied some of good schemes and notes the Breaker who had it before the goblin got her hands on it, but I’ll let you copy some of my notes out of mine sometime in return. Consider it the cost of your tuition. I let Sanchez take a look at it and picked up some of her schemes for both of us in return. We picked up more than enough gold to make that little problem you have go away.”



You smile as you look at the tome. The book has plenty of schemes in it, but the beauty is in all the extra pages where cursebreakers can add their notes and custom schemes. It's mainly why most Breakers are so protective of their copies. You've seen Bill and Maria haggle over trading a few schemes from each other. You suspect he is trying to get his hands on 'Field of Screams'.

They help you into a sitting position and chat with you. Thundercloud wants you to practice your meditation, but makes you promise not to transform until Thursday at the earliest. The others stop by and say hello, even Hack's 'pretty witch'. Hack also is very glad to see you. He pats you on your head like a pet and grabs the pot filled with leftover and mostly uneaten chili. Greedily spooning it into his mouth, Hack stops to burp, thump his chest and break wind directly into your face before heading back outside.

You grab your journal and use it to fan away the Hack's unpleasant little gift before scanning Luna's three letters, all very concerned about your health.

Dear Luna,

I'm okay. I'm sorry I worried you so much. The battle was awful. I don't want to really talk about it right now. It's one thing to be caught in a fight and have to kill someone or something. It's another thing altogether to go looking for a fight and knowing that you're going to have to kill.

I was left with a small group of goblins and my new buddy Hack. He's the same troll I helped with his love life problems a ways back. Collins jokes that the Normals have these laws of combat. One of them goes something like this – the diversionary attack you are ignoring is probably their main force. Well that about summed it up. They came out of some holes and attacked us. We were outnumbered and only Hack and I made it out.

The goblins were led by this female goblin, who wanted her people to abandon the Wizarding world. She had this magical item that let her cast spells like us. We fought. She hurt me pretty bad, while I was

killing the Worgs on Hack. I killed her. I'm stuck in bed for the next few days until I heal up, so I will be writing more.

My work on my disposable rune is coming along nicely since I last mentioned it. I got one more scheme working and I now have my own copy of Golinard's. I'm almost a real cursebreaker.

I'm glad that I've gotten to know you better. I could've used a friend like you a long time ago. Are you considering letting some others in on the joke? I think it's everybody's loss that they don't get to know the real Luna.

If only I had been quick enough to change into my bowtruckle animagus form, I would have been able to slip away unnoticed!

Well, I have to go now.

Cheers,

HJP

You close the journal as Kwan sits down next to you, "Still trying to get out of my lessons?"

"No, sir. I just keep getting into fights. At least I won." You answer with a smile.

"I can teach other things. Today we learn how to cast spells without saying stupid words. Words help focus spell and make stronger, but not completely necessary. Words don't even have to be in stupid Latin. Magic doesn't care about words. Only us stupid humans care about words. Kwan has three-day stupid cook proof method of teaching you."

Oh shit! This doesn't sound good, not good at all. He pulls out a piece of washcloth and a roll of duct tape. Now it doesn't look good.

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

“Of course! Day one, I stick nice clean washcloth into mouth and tape mouth shut. You learn to cast spells by not making words.”

“Wait! What happens if I don’t get it on day one?”

He gets an evil grin on his face, “Oh, day two we use Collins’ dirty sock instead of nice clean washcloth.”

You gulp. You’ve heard Kwan call Collins ‘Stinky Feet’ on more than one occasion. You don’t want to ask. You have to ask. In a weak voice you ask, “What happens on day three?”

The grin gets even bigger. He leans forward and whispers with a menacing voice, “Day three is Mexican cursebreaker’s used underwear. Don’t get to day three! Even Kwan scared to touch. Now open mouth. Not much of day one left!”

Now would be a good time to panic.

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Author’s notes – Okay so maybe Kwan has some objectionable teaching methods. You gotta admit he knows how to motivate, doesn’t he?

Disclaimer – You are still Harry Potter. Despite your best effort someone named JKR owns you, your rights and everything else in your ‘Universe’. Maybe she can give you some advice about Luna?

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Chapter 15 – I’m a Tiger when I want Love

Date – Wednesday August 7th, 1996

Dear Harry,

I am so glad you’re okay! At this rate, you are going to drive me LOONEY! Sorry bad pun, but I am guessing you are smiling now. Are you healing okay? The other message you sent sounded a bit desperate. Any particular reason you need to know how to cast spells silently within the next day? Sorry I don’t know any tricks that might help. Maybe, you could try visualizing the words in your mind? Let me know how that goes.

I contacted the bookstore about getting a few of those books you are using. Several of them are on the Ministry Restricted list, so I can’t buy a copy. Thanks for sketching out your Flaming Spears of Death™ runic scheme for me. If I had any friends, I could tell them I am the first one on my block to have a custom designed rune from the Boy Who Seems to Finally be Using his Brain.

Speaking of which, here is the part of the letter where I make myself sound like the mature sensible lady I am. I appreciate that you want me to have ‘real’ friends outside of you, because you may not be coming back anytime soon. However, don’t push me on this. I only

told you because you caught me and I thought you could use a good laugh. I am quite happy with my life as it is. You, of all people, should be aware of how annoying it is for people to be telling you how to live your life.

Now that you have been sufficiently admonished, you may beg for my forgiveness in any way you deem appropriate. Normally, I would require more baked goods, but if I were to collect on all the desserts you presently 'owe' me, I would be a couple of stone heavier! Perhaps, we should look at having you cook full meals for me. Chicken and fish are good. I'm not partial to red meat. Pork and Lamb are only acceptable occasionally, as in once a week at most. Salads are nice. I am rather partial to Bleu Cheese dressing. I prefer my vegetables steamed or sautéed in a light butter sauce.

If you get the urge to buy me something, I advise you to think first and buy second. Ask your self 'wouldn't this look nice on Luna?' or 'I bet Luna could use this.' the final question you have to ask is 'Could this gift be opened in the presence of Luna's father without causing said father to name you as the latest person to succumb to the dreaded Rotfang conspiracy?'

So that is you care and feeding manual for Luna Lovegood. Please abide by these guidelines and you will not suffer my wrath!

Hopefully, you're well enough to put your Niffler Animagus form to use and go find some lost treasure. Well all this talk of food has got me feeling a bit starved, so I am off to rummage through the kitchen.

Ta,

LML

PS. You never exactly told me how much the 'Troll Love Doctor' charges? I am sure Daddy can find you some clients with all his contacts, after you have returned and dealt with that pesky evil wizard problem. You should consider giving up Ward Crafting and Curse Breaking for opening up a dating service for non-humans. There is a vast and untapped market there.

Dear Luna,

It makes me wonder how someone could have a food obsession like my traitorous ex-best friend and still maintain her girlish figure? If I can weasel (pun intended) that secret out of you, I can unite all the witches of Europe as my army and simply crush my pesky evil wizard problem! Then, I will be free to improve the love lives of non-humans everywhere!

You'll be pleased to learn that I am writing this letter to you by the feeble light of my own spell. The spell was cast with no vocalization on my part with only minutes to spare before I was forced to go to Day Three of the Kwan School for Wordless Magic. I would have written sooner, but I was busy scrubbing my mouth out with whatever I could find.

I know this is an odd request, but do you know a spell to transfigure or conjure piece of feminine underwear? I need one for a prank involving my instructor's food. Should I survive this prank, I will be eternally grateful for your assistance. The look on his face should be worth dodging a hex or two.

Anyway, I can do most first and second year charms with no words at all. Transfiguration is currently impossible and I doubt my wordless stunner would knock out even my cool Gypsy Moth Animagus form, but I'll get better at it.

I am feeling much better and I am out of bed again. Of course, that means I'm back to cooking, but at least Hack is handling my guard duty and Thundercloud has cleared me to practice my transformations again. I spent a couple of hours last night playing rock, scissor and paper with Hack. He doesn't quite get that paper beats rock yet, but we had a blast anyway! I believe his exact words might have been, 'Rock crush everything!!!!' Still he's cool to hang out with and he did save my sorry behind by getting Maria back here to heal me. Hopefully, he won't ask me to help him improve his chances with his 'Pretty Witch'. She has a thing about hexing people's naughty parts! Hell, she used some kind of partial disillusioning spell on our fearless leader, while he was sleeping and he screamed like a girl in the morning when he couldn't see something rather important to him.

I am beginning to doubt the sanity of my current traveling companions, but they are a lively bunch.

I tried to learn how to shoot a gun today. Collins had me try his AK-47. It's kind of ironic that it's called an AK. I can add another item to the list of things that I am not very good at – like gift giving. It kicks. It's loud and provided that my intended target is a non-moving object between the size of a tree or a barn, then I should be able to hit it from roughly twenty meters away. Collins said that we're going to try again tomorrow and maybe try a shotgun instead. If I don't show any progress, then he threatened to let Kwan try and teach me. I think I need a break from Kwan's instructional techniques for a few days. Probably the best and worst thing I could ever do to Hogwarts would be to convince Kwan apply for the Defense position.

We're down to the final layer of wards before we can enter the ruins. It's too bad that I haven't been able to see it, except for a couple of trips into a pensieve. I should be able to check it out tomorrow.

Well that's all for now. I need to practice wordless magic a bit more, finish dinner and get some rest. I'll leave you with this final little tidbit of advice; there is no good way to remove duct tape from around your mouth. It's best just to pull quickly.

Harry

No sooner do you put your pen down then the book glows again. She must have written another letter. Once again, you watch as the letter writes itself. Your mood darkens slightly. It's not from Luna; it's from Looney. Is it some kind of game to her? Why does she have to keep pretending when it's just you and her?

Dear Harold,

I have heard you were traveling in the Southern Hemisphere, despite the propaganda from the Rotfangs that say you are dwelling with your relatives. Daddy says that the phlegm infested belly blowers migrate in that direction during this part of the year. The best defense is to tape a damp washcloth to your stomach. Otherwise you may well

wake up with an embarrassing gooey mess on your stomach that others may tease a boy your age about.

I have just returned from a shopping trip to the mostly deserted Diagon Alley. Surprisingly, I encountered Ginevra in her brothers' shop the other day minding the cash register. She seemed a bit depressed. I offered to drive off the Skitterwings that seemed to have driven her into such a mood. She refused my offer of assistance, but I hope she heeds my warnings to avoid dairy products for the next two weeks.

Amazingly people seem mostly unaware of my presence. I overheard one of her brothers, the older twin or was it the younger? Oh well, I guess that's not important. He mentioned to his brother that some cursed object he was trying to destroy injured Professor Dumbledore. He was taken to the hospital in hopes of reattaching several damaged fingers. I suppose that is what comes of trying to destroy a Holiday fruitcake after the summer solstice.

I have also received a reply to my letter sent to Neville. He and his grandmother are well. She has such a lovely vulture hat, though I am uncertain why she would openly wear a symbol supporting Nordic creature rights, but I digress. He has a new wand to replace the one he lost just before school ended and hopes that you will be continuing your defense study group this year. He also mentioned that he tried to send you a letter on two separate occasions and the owls would not leave with the message. Daddy happily informed him that even though Fudge is out of official power, his control of the postal system continues to this day.

I look forward to further correspondence.

Looney

Dear Luna,

Did Dumbledore really get injured? Could you confirm without being 'Looney?' I know what you said before about 'staying in character', but this is very important!



You don't have to pretend with me. I know the real you and I prefer Luna to Looney. If it's not too much to ask could you drop the act, when it's just the two of us? If I wanted an actress in my life, I would have stayed at the Weasley family detention center!

Sorry, that might have been too harsh, but I really enjoy writing to you and getting letters from you.

Your last letter arrived just as I was finishing mine, so there really isn't much more to add. Glad to hear Neville is okay.

Harry

Did Dumbledore really find and destroy a Horcrux? She could have just told you! Of course, you haven't told her about horcruxes and quite honestly, you don't plan on it. When Bill comes back you really need to talk with him about this!

You tried to avoid mentioning what you really thought of her 'secret life'. For some stupid reason, she feels like she has to keep pretending with you! You also have stopped responding to her "Looney" letters. She seems to get rather touchy on that subject. After knowing that she is 'faking' it, it just seems like she is forcing it. You don't know why it bothers you so much? It's just strange that she wouldn't want friends. Maybe you should just let it go? Here you are spending your entire life being called a 'freak' and such, all the while wanting to be just a normal kid. Luna on the other hand wants to masquerade as a 'freak'. Then again, all those annoying fanboy wizard wannabes probably sit at home and wonder how cool it would be the famous Harry Potter! What a bunch of Creeveys!

You set the journal aside and start working on your wordless casting. Trying, but not succeeding, to quell the anger you are experiencing. You seriously wanted to hurt Bill after he described that he had learned with a silencing charm and a sticking charm to keep his jaw shut. He admitted that it took him about a week to get it. You had to admit that Kwan's way was much quicker though much less hygienically safe. If Luna can't come through with a spell for you, maybe Karina will know one. You can always buy a pair. You just

want to see his face when he finds it in your stew. That's a Patronus memory just waiting to happen.

"You are putting too much effort into your casting. Again Mr. Kwan's techniques have produced results, but they are not always the best results. Now that you have learned to cast in desperation, you must learn to let the magic flow normally."

You look up from your concentration to give Thundercloud an incredulous face. Kwan and the Eagle are becoming a bad comedy act. Kwan terrorizes you into learning something and Thundercloud comes behind him and says whatever he just showed you will work, but this is how you really want to do it. It's like a game to the two of them or something.

"Cast your light spell again. See how you look at your wand? Do you normally stare at your wand waiting for something to happen? No, of course not. Like your transformation, you no longer are required to force your magic to trigger the transformation. You merely release your magic and allow it to follow a path it has already traveled before."

Thundercloud goes over to his trunk and comes back with a strip of cloth and some headphones. "I like to use sensory deprivation in my techniques. I will put this blindfold over your eyes and a silencing charm over the hearing protection. You will not be able to see or hear. Cast the spell with words five times. As you cast try and follow the sensation of the magic flowing through your body and into your wand. Then relax for a minute and cast the spell without words. Allow the magic to move down the familiar pathways of your body."

"But Kwan says..."

"You are not Kwan. You are also not me. He wields his magic like a weapon. I release my magic. By now, you should realize there are many different approaches to learning the same thing. It is like asking which is stronger Fire or Water? Which soaks the ground more, the torrential downpour or hours of gentle rain? There is no right or wrong answer. You must strive to find the path that is best for you to learn."

You want to protest more, but decide to give it a whirl. Even more fun than the 'True Animagus' debate you could have with Professor Kitty Cat, would be to watch her and Thundercloud go at it. She's pretty much cut from the same cloth as Kwan – Magic is a tool and you must learn to use this tool. Lone Thundercloud is more from the school of Magic is a force, guide it and allow your thoughts to shape the result. Harry Potter is a card carrying member of the 'I wish people would quit fucking contradicting each other around me.' school.

For the next twenty minutes, he alternates putting the headphones and blindfolds on you. The net result is a noticeably brighter light emanating from your wand than before. It is still not as good as using words, but more surprisingly when you use words it is brighter than ever. Gob smacked, you regard Thundercloud, who gives you a grandfatherly smile. "Always remember, the weakest part of any spell is not the magic, nor the wand, but the self-imposed limitations of the person trying to cast it. Keep the headphones and blindfolds. Add this to your regimen and learn how to better connect with the magic inside of you. Speaking of which, you seem to have hit a stumbling block after a minute in your animal form. Do you have any idea why?"

"No, I always loose focus at that point. Any ideas?"

"I think we should try something truly immersive. I would like to lock you in a cage in your form all night. I see you are most likely suffering from one of two common problems. The first is that you haven't truly accepted your animal. Your constant vomiting bouts lead in that direction, many of predators suffer from this. Like our experiment in Wordless magic, it is less about the magic then it is about the person casting it. The other possibility is your own fear. The fear that you are devolving into your animal and that eventually, you will simply cease to be human altogether. Many of those, who have undergone the change, suffer from this as well. The night of your initial transformation was the longest time you spent in your animal. I believe we can create a suitable cage to house you for the next two nights. Perhaps if you spent your evenings in your other form, it would become more acceptable to you."

“What if I get out of the cage? I could hurt someone or run off into the jungle.”

“You already have a new tracking bracelet. We will come and find you. As for harming us, we are all adults, Harry. We will be fine.” You aren’t so sure about his answer, an entire night in your Jaguar form!

“Okay, if you think it will help.” Screw it! Pettigrew spent years being a rat. You can handle a night as a cat.

You stop for now to pull dinner out of the oven – two pan’s of ‘Potter’s Best Meatloaf’ coming right up. The color looks right; it seems a little bit too cooked for you. Then again, it could just be the part of you that likes meat to be fresh and bloody. You shake a bit more pepper on the potatoes and carrots and hover everything over the table. Hack gets one pan and the rest of you split the other one. Hack certainly eats a lot!

You tap a small gong with your wand and know that within a minute the twin to this gong will ring informing the others that dinner is ready. Engorging a plate and a fork, you scoop Hack’s portion out and get yourself a plate. Maria Sanchez is first in the tent. She looks more tired than ugly, which is saying quite a bit for her. She takes a big whiff of the air. “Smells good. Whoever taught you how to cook deserves an award.”

She fails to notice the dark look that crosses your face. Oh, Petunia deserves something. Yes she does. That much is certain. People always assume that your hands are all rough from flying and Quidditch. Seriously, all you have to do is hold on to a broom. If you take good care of it and change out the grips every season, it isn’t a problem! The stores sell gloves! They never stop to wonder about why the other side is rough as well. How many seven year olds out there have grease burns from pan frying fried chicken, because it’s the fat pig and his walrus son’s favorite. No, your hands are that way from cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, painting, weeding, mowing, and trimming. If this whole magic thing doesn’t pan out, you can always open your own Handyman service.

Oddly enough, you plan on having pan-fried chicken tomorrow night. Having been exposed to the Wizarding world, you could actually perfectly duplicate The Colonel's recipe, as two of the eleven herbs and spices are variants only found in magical greenhouses and grown in Grapplehorn fertilizer. He was one of the most wealthy and powerful Squibs who ever lived. You picked up that little tidbit from the Alpaca Animagus who works in the greenhouses that help produce the special spices on the Lakota reservation.

Deciding you prefer Hack's company to people who stir up bad memories, you take Hack's dinner out to him and join him on a stump to eat. You cast a quick spell to drive away some of the bugs that are attracted to your food, while making a note to check on the strength of the 'critter' wards. The store bought wards might be misaligned or just weakening. Hack looks upset.

"What's wrong buddy?"

"Hack like crunchies! Add more flavor. Puny James chase away crunchies!" There's a joke in there somewhere. You just don't know what it is.

"Sorry, but I really don't like bugs with my food. I can go back inside if you want."

"No, James make good food for Hack. Hack never had wizard make him food before. It makes Hack feel special." Maybe, you could take Hack for a nice dinner at #4. The looks on their faces would be worth it.

"Thanks Hack. I've gotta feed you right if we're going to crush more skulls together." That gets a big toothy smile from a Jungle Troll twice your size.

"Old Animagus want Hack to get wood to make a cage for big kitty cat after dinner. Hack hasn't seen big kitty cat around." The word 'Animagus' sounds weird coming out of Hack's mouth. Hey, maybe he knows the answer to the question all the 'humans' seem to be dodging?

“Hack, I’m curious, if you have more than one Animagus what do you say? Is it Animagi or Animagus? Are you sure it’s Animagus and not Animage?”

The Jungle Troll looks lost in thought for a moment. “Goblins tell Hack to watch for Wizards and Witches who can turn into animals. Goblins say, ‘One is Animagus. Two is Animagi. Three is get club, why three Animagi in bank at same time? Probably going to try to rob bank.’ That’s what Goblins tell Hack. Hack always listens to Goblins. Hack’s brother Pogo not listen to Goblins. Goblins don’t let Pogo guard bank. Pogo has to carry rocks in the mine. Hack beat Pogo at Plunk. Pogo more angry than Glurg, when Hack win. Pogo knock two of Hack’s teeth out. For that, Hack sleep with both Pogo’s girlfriends.”

There is a certain logic that you can’t argue with there. You just can’t believe after all this time you find out the answer from Hack of all people! It’s odd that what you had once considered the greatest friendship you’d ever know began with a fight against a troll. Now, your new friendship is with a troll after fighting alongside of him and saving each other’s life. The world does work in mysterious ways.

The two of you finish your dinner laughing and making jokes. Hack likes knock-knock jokes. You know a few. Dudley used to tell them, usually finishing them with a punch to the gut or smack on your head. A cruel smile crosses your face as you picture Hack tell Dudley a joke using Dudder’s method. You grab the empty plates and take them back into the tent. You sit down across Bill and show him your last letter from Luna. He gets a very thoughtful look on his face.

“Dark cursed object huh?”

“Yeah, you reckon?”

“Yeah, I reckon.”

“Thought so.”

“Lets keep it in mind, if we get our hands on one. So Harry, are you up for a night out under the stars?”

"I guess so. I need to get passed this problem. How are the curses breaking?"

"Slowly, very slowly. We should have the last layer defeated soon. It's tough going. We've been at it for three straight days. Shit, I'd like to think I would be halfway into Hogwarts by now. Place is a fucking fortress. You did a nice job of badly carving runes on the sappers." Bill smiles and gives you a backhanded compliment.

"Asshole!"

He gets a big grin on his face. "Well inefficient is what we were aiming for. Sloppy and all over the place, well that might work for Karina in the sack, but it doesn't do anything for me out here in the jungle."

"You really are a pervert aren't you?"

"I once warded our bed so it vanished Fleur's clothes when she got on it. I figured it would save time. A bit of advice, don't do that. Women and their garments have a special relationship. Don't mess with it. She wasn't happy with the loss of one of her favorite nighties."

"What did she do?"

"Charmed the crapper to act like a bidet. She's not very good with runes or wards, but she knows some nasty charms. Even put a timer on it to wait thirty seconds. That reminds me, is Sanchez the first one up in the morning? I could use some revenge."

"Wow, a pervert with a death wish. I'll help if you show me how to transfigure something to look like women's underwear."

"Why?"

"Kwan. Payback."

"And you say I have a death wish. Why not go all the way and use the real deal?"

“He would kill me or at least maim me.”

“Yeah, that’s true. What are you going to do with it?”

“I was thinking his stew, maybe sometime next week.”

“How about a quick switching charm as he goes across the wards. He won’t notice the extra tingle of magic coming across the ward line.”

“Nice idea. I’ll keep it in mind.” Bill has an evil mind to match his grin. After about ten seconds of this maniacal grin you finally ask, “What’s with the Cheshire cat routine?” Something’s wrong, very wrong. Two rather strong hands clap down on your shoulder blades. Damn, shouldn’t you have a spider sense or something?

“Stupid cook want to play a joke on Kwan. Maybe, stupid cook should look and see if Kwan is around first before opening big stupid mouth. I think it’s time for you to have another lesson. Bring your wand. Let’s have some fun...”

Bill’s face is as red as his hair. “Mister Kwan, please remember to leave him in one piece. Don’t do anything we can’t reverse.”

“I don’t understand English that well. I think you said teach him a good lesson.” The Korean Hitwizard chuckles on the way out the door.

Mouth dangling open, you look at Bill. “You! Fucking! Suck!”

“Such language! Out of the mouths of babes! The Golden Rule of Pranking is never say anything about it when your mark is in the room. Well, you better not keep Kwan waiting.”

Forty-five minutes later you’re rubbing ointment on various bruises and welts all over your body. You’ve already given yourself a nice hefty pain numbing charm. Kwan felt bad that he didn’t get you anything for your birthday. Instead, he wanted to play a game of ‘Pin the tail on the Harry’. The longest you were able to dodge that damn thing was eight minutes! At least it only stung you like a stinging hex and didn’t draw blood. Bill sat outside and kept score. That’s it. You’re



going to Sanchez! She's got some nasty stuff and she knows Bill is out to get her. You can make a deal.

Still, it was an educational game, though painful. You could banish the tail or shield yourself from Kwan's curses. You suppose the point of the exercise was to teach you how to react when fighting more than one opponent. So much for getting that rest you told Luna you were going to get! The cage is completed. Transfigured from the raw materials Hack gathered. It looks like a pen from the zoo. Bill's been nice enough to add a sign that says 'Don't feed the Harry!' They part the bars enough to allow you to get in.

Taking a deep breath and flipping Bill off, you make your transformation. Hack comes over to watch. "Oh, James is kitty cat. Why James ask Hack about Animagi if James is one?" This only serves to make Bill double over in laughter. He sure is having a good time at your expense isn't he?

The night passes in a haze. It was almost like being badly Obliviated. You were there, but you weren't there. It's hard to explain. You remember Hack being there most of the night. He kept talking to you, but you didn't understand what he was saying. It was like walking through a dense fog. There were patches that didn't seem so bad and others where you don't remember anything at all. Eventually, you must have slept for a time. You had bizarre dreams. They were full of sights, shapes and sounds. You felt like you were running through the jungle after all these shapes.

You're not really sure how long after Thundercloud forced you back into your human form that it took you to become functional again. You feel worse than that night you got drunk as you stagger to your feet. Mercifully, they let you take a shower. Collins is actually doing breakfast, though there's a rumor going around that he could burn a hard boiled egg.

Still not feeling well, you dress and sit down to your glowing journal. You shovel some scrambled eggs and cheese into your mouth. The writing lacks her usual fluid strokes. It looks more like a scribble.

Harry,

Yes, I overheard one of the twins saying Dumbledore got hurt. Why are you being such a prat over my Looney letters? Considering you're hiding behind this 'James Black the mystery Animagus' façade? Is this a case of the kettle calling the cauldron black? Is your insensitive Pig Animagus form is starting to bleed over into your normal personality?

I wanted to wake up this morning to a nice friendly letter from a friend. Instead I get this, 'Quit playing around and just tell me shit'! Sorry, I didn't realize that I was Harry Potter's personal news service. Let me spell it out for you. I don't need your approval and I certainly don't need your permission to be Looney.

Why are you being so stubborn about this? Don't you have enough going on right now? Do you really need to pick an argument with me? I haven't had many friends in my life, but I was under the impression that friends are supposed to be supportive and not be so judgmental.

I've got to go. Daddy's in a snit this morning. Scrimgeour's office just Flooed and they are sending someone to the paper today. I think it might be Umbridge! They are probably going to try and pressure him into becoming a Ministry Propaganda rag like that other paper. So, yeah it's just fun and games here in Jolly Old England.

Luna

Well that could have gone better! You're not really in the mood for this today. Wisely, you close the book. She wouldn't want to read anything you might write at the moment. You're tired and generally out of it. You'll write something later, when you are calm. Maybe, she will have calmed down as well.

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Roughly two hours later, your 'transformation' hangover has cleared and you are supporting Sanchez and Shithead, otherwise known as Bill, out at the ruins. A repetitive ward chant has been going on for about ten straight minutes. Occasionally, the barrier flares, but for all intents, you'd be just as effective tossing rocks at the structure.

Sanchez stops abruptly. "This isn't working. What now?"

"See if the others can generate a seismic disturbance?"

"You really want to trigger an earthquake?"

"It would be nice, but I don't think they could make it big enough to really disrupt the wards. This last layer doesn't seem to be responding to our chants. What other options are open to us?"

"Destroy both our sappers and trigger a cascade. Start hammering away at any wards that survive?"

"Messy, loud, and likely to attract the local government's attention. I don't know if they would like us destroying this site. I'm thankful that they never knew about the other site. You're the local expert. What ward chants should we switch to?"

"None of the Aztec or Incan ones seem to be working. How about you try some of your Egyptian chants or Summerian if you know any. Harry sticks with the basic Nordic chant. I know a couple of African ones. These ruins look like they're much older than the usual ones. They could go all the way back to Mayan times. Babylonian, Greek and Summerian are just as close to Mayan as the Incan and Aztec ones."

"Let's let Harry go at them, while you and I use the omniscanners to scan for the actual wards. Maybe we can see what we are really up against? If they have a reservoir, we could be here for a long time."

"Sounds good."

"Bill, what's a reservoir?"

"Harry, it's like a muggle battery. They're hard to craft and store energy for sieges. Hogwarts has at least two of them."

At their direction, you start chanting again. Your energy smacks against the wards, which aren't even budging.

“Over there to the left of the rock outcropping. I think I see a faint glow!”

They let you go at it for another ten minutes. It's the magical equivalent of being told to stand over there and hold something really heavy for a while.

You sit over on a rock, trying to catch your breath. Bill is walking with Collins around the backside of the ruins and Maria went back to the camp for a book that might have some of the runes in it. Oddly, you feel like a chill coming over you – in the jungle of all places.

A voice scares the living crap out of you, “I was hoping I had killed you.” Then again, would you really want living crap in you?

There floating next to you is a ghost. It's the female goblin leader! Hey wait a second Goblins don't become ghosts!

“Uh, I didn't know Goblins could become ghosts.”

Her pale face grimaces. “We can't! It was probably that damn relic allowing me to use human magic and now I'm some kind of thing! Curse you!”

“Curse me! Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were trying pretty hard to kill me. You got pretty damn close, if you want my opinion. You attacked our campsite first.”

The two of you scowl at each other for a minute. “So what am I supposed to do?” Not exactly a question you expected.

“Go haunt someplace. I don't know, most people become ghosts because they're too scared to move on or they have unfinished business.” At least that's what you got from all the ghosts you've ever spoken to.

“I'm not scared of anything!”

“Well then you have unfinished business. Look at it this way. You could walk, well float into the Goblin tunnels and they’ll have to get a human to chase you out. You can go talk to your people and they can’t stop you.”

The renegade smiles at you. “I always said they could kill the messenger, but the couldn’t kill the message. I’ll be their worst nightmare.”

She floats right through you sending a shiver up your spine before turning back to you. “So, why were you in the valley human?”

“We wanted to search the ruins.”

“You’ll find nothing there. You’ve already taken it from us.”

“What? How’d you get past the wards?”

She looks at you with an open look of disgust on her face. “Where did we fight?”

“A cave?”

“And what’s inside a cave?”

“Tunnels”

“And the tunnels go where?”

“Oh.”

“And you are supposed to be the dominant form of life on this planet? Maybe my job won’t be as hard as I thought it would be. Goodbye, human. I’m going home.”

“Before you go, do you want to piss off a human?” Inspiration is an amazing thing. It can strike at the most wonderful times.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we could go tell Bill that you already beat him and got in to the ruins. I’ll grab some omnisculars. I want to record the look on his face for posterity.”

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Bill was still bitching when you got back to camp. You’re not really helping his mood any. “Aw, just because a Goblin beat you to the treasure doesn’t mean you’re a bad curse breaker.”

“I can believe the idiots didn’t extend their wards below ground. Fucking idiots!” When he is angry, Bill repeats himself a lot.

The portion of the tunnels the Goblins collapsed had a passage that led right into the ruins. It took about thirty minutes to remove the rubble and walk right into the lower levels of the tomb. Bill contented himself by taking traces of the runes, which had now been positively identified, as Mayan. Bill points out a series of columns covered in runes. You briefly hid from a basilisk behind a group of ones just like them in the Chamber of Secrets.

“This is a reservoir. There is one near the Hufflepuff dorms and another in the passageway leading to Ravenclaw tower.”

“There’s also one in the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Really! Wow, three reservoirs at Hogwarts. Always add two additional sappers for each reservoir you know about. At this point, I’d assume that Gryffindor has one too.”

“Yeah, Slytherin’s was just like these except the columns had snakes coiled around them.”

You spent the next couple of hours tracing interior runes and looking for anything the Goblins might have missed.

Upon returning to camp, everyone sat around the table trying to figure out what to do next. Despite the fact that the expedition has currently made a profit and is ‘in the black’, the mood is somber. Two of the

three potential sites have been investigated and the results are not promising.

“Damn! The only way to beat a Fidelius charm is to either have a magical map or a Portkey that predated the charm. Floos or Apparition points can’t be found. We have no idea how he managed a charm that big! Most Fidelius charms can barely cover a house. He made a whole city vanish! Merlin, we don’t even know who he might have made his secret keeper!”

Maria Sanchez looked over at the still angry Bill Weasley. “Maybe we should pack it in, while we are ahead of the game. I didn’t believe we would ever find the lost city. So many have tried. None have ever succeeded, except for that guy with the expedition that stumbled on an active Portkey. We still have one last site to check. We hit it, get what we can and get out of here before the South Americans decide to ‘audit’ our expedition.”

You can see Bill’s frustrated face. He sure as shit can’t say, ‘Oh, well we’re actually trying to find a Horcrux made by a Dark Lord that might be hidden in that dead city.’ He’s probably wishing that he were back at Gringotts doing pest patrol on their shipments of gold.

Wait just a damn minute!

“Bill! I just thought of something!” The words are moving too slow out of your mouth. “That city has a Gringotts branch in it right?”

“Yes. So?”

“The Bulk Transfer System – did humans make it or Goblins?”

“Merlin’s hairy balls! The goblins made it! I mean sure, wizards used some of the principles behind it to create the Floo network, but it might be entirely outside the Fidelius magic. It was meant for metals, but I think early on, it was used for animal barter. It might not work for humans though.”

You can’t resist. It’s too easy. “Bill, some of us can turn into animals, you know? I’ve also heard there is this powerful force called magic.

There are these things called spells and potions. They can actually change a person into an animal for a short time.”

He claps you on your back. “If you weren’t a guy, I would kiss you.”

You idly wonder if you should lie and say it was Maria’s idea and see if he is still willing to pucker up. No, even you aren’t that cruel. Everyone else is picking up on his insane enthusiasm. Maria is muttering that it could actually work! The ugly mexihag must know enough about the system as well.

“So, how do we convince the Goblins to let us use their system?”

“That’s going to take some negotiation. We’ll have to cut a deal with them for a cut of the profits. Let’s assume for a second that he didn’t clean the place out. There could be a massive amount of galleons in that branch.”

“Won’t they have to give it back to the people that owned the vaults?”

“Maybe they will. That is if the Goblins tell their clients that they can now access that branch. They might have already settled with the former vault owners for insurance and liability purposes. We should go back there tomorrow and get the broom flying on this one! Right now, we’ve got a little clout having already participated in a ‘business venture’ with them. That might go away when a certain Ghost gets there, so we might need to cement the deal before she floats into town. It will probably take her a few weeks to float all the way to Rio, if she is even going there. She might head out to one of the other bigger settlements.”

The rest of the evening passed with much excitement discussing the possibility of going to a lost city. You feel quite proud of yourself and justifiably so. Kwan even says that you get a night off from his ‘lessons’. Thundercloud gave you a choice for another night out in the cage, if you want. You are tempted just to take the night off, but you need to put this behind you.

Bill follows you out. “Damn Harry, bringing you along was the best thing that could happen!”



“Can I ask you something? It’s been bugging me for the last few days. Being stuck in bed gave me too much time to think.”

“Sure, Harry. What do you want to know?”

“How much did you really know beforehand? You were able to pull together an awful lot of my financial information pretty quickly and get a copy of Sirius’ will all in a couple of hours.”

“I didn’t know anything about what was happening to you at the Burrow. I’ll swear an oath if you want me to, but I knew pretty much everything about your finances. It all looked on the up and up, with Remus approving everything and Dumbledore doing his whole ‘Leader of the Light’ thing. I probably could have asked more questions, but they offered to fund this expedition and I was too dumb to read further into it beyond getting to lead my own expedition.”

You let that sink in. A few weeks ago, you probably would have thrown a fit and gotten irate. Since then, you’ve matured a bit. Bill has been instrumental in your growth both as a wizard and as a person. You consider him your best friend. “Thanks for being straight with me, mate. I don’t need an oath from you. What I do want to know is this; eventually, we are going to go back there. I’m not exactly the old man’s biggest fan right now. I will have to stand up to him. What happens to you then?”

“I already owe you my life at the very least for the whole escape from certain death incident. It is both a life debt and a personal debt of honor. I will never knowingly betray you, whatever the cost. If it hurts my standing with my family, so be it. I hope it doesn’t come to that, but that’s a problem for another day.”

“How much did Dumbledore tell you about the prophecy the Order was guarding?”

“That it concerned you and Voldemort. He said that you were important to the war. You told both Fleur and I the first two lines back in England. How much more do you know?”

“I know the full wording. I’m the one, who has to beat him. It comes down to him or me. One of us dies by the other’s hand and it doesn’t say which one. I’d prefer it was him that dies, but apparently he’s cheating. I’ve learned more in the last month, then the last five years in Hogwarts. For the first time, I think I might have a chance against him that won’t involve dumb luck.”

“Sometime soon, we’ll sit down and discuss the prophecy. I had good marks in the subject. Some people’s ‘inner eye’ is just a well-developed ‘gut instinct’. We can talk about the wording and whatever else you want. Tomorrow, we break camp and head back. You can give Karina enough money to get out of the country and I can start preliminary negotiations with the Goblins about using the Transfer System.”

“Do you think they have already tried?”

“Maybe, but Goblins loath magical travel. They do most of it by Portkey or by flight. Floo and Apparition are physically painful to them, but they do love those One Speed Only Carts. Go get some more practice in your jaguar form.”

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After yet another blurry night out in the cage in your struggle for clarity, you sit again at the table fighting off the effects of several hours spent getting acquainted with your animal. You don’t seem as bad off, but that could be just your imagination. The adjustment for herd animals like Michelle the ‘Amazing Alpaca’ is pretty easy. They can simply be put in a cage and allowed to graze for as long as it takes. She’s probably already in full control. Thundercloud says he is headed home. You tell him to send his best regards to Lauren and ask how she is progressing in her own search for clarity with her animal. You still are weighing your response to Luna’s last letter, uncertain if you should apologize or stand your ground. Maybe a day or two will allow you to approach it with a cooler head and prevent more of those embarrassing teenage faux pas?

You, Hack, and Bill head from the campsite back to Rio. The others depart straight for the International Portkey terminal in Sao Paulo.

Hack told you that he is going back to win some more Plunk. Bill seems to have that on his mind as well, as a certain Mr. Weasley is giddy like a schoolgirl. Fleur is coming back into town. Heck, you might even be able to get her to give you some advice on Luna. Depending on the negotiations with the Goblins, he might ask her to hang around. He even hinted that he might finally be able to go to Paris with her and help her select a suitable engagement ring from the Delacour vaults.

You're happy for him. It reminds you that there is something worth fighting for. It would be nice to have something like that in your life. He's checking into the normal hotel out in town and you are heading over to Karina's to give her enough money to get out of Brazil. At the edge of her property you know something is wrong. You don't feel the perimeter wards. They're down!

You draw your wand, checking for the single use wards, also gone. You cast the tracking charm to determine where the tracking bracelet on Chico is. Your holly and phoenix feather wand spins in your hand and points to the North.

Making a cautious approach, you ease the door opened. The inside has been trashed. Scorch marks are on the walls and the furniture, which had been in poor general repair to begin with had been destroyed. The broomstick you hoped they had escaped on lay broken in two by the entrance to the bathroom.

You hear a voice from outside. "Who's inside? Come out. If I see a wand, I am going to start cursing. You glance out the window and see Paulo Vangelder standing at the perimeter with his wand drawn.

"Paulo! It's me, James! The wards are down."

"Come out where I can see you, now!"

You step out with your hands up in a non-threatening manner.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I just got here."

"I was sent out of town on assignment. I just got back this morning. Damn! They must have done it to get me out of the way." Paulo walks into the house with an angry look on his face. He goes in to Chico's bedroom and comes out. "It looks like some of his clothes are missing. If they took clothes that means he's probably still alive."

"I've got a tracking charm on Chico. It points that way."

"Shit, Nikolai Colastos' estate is that way. Can you apparate?"

"Yeah."

"We'll go get my partner, Amanda. She can help."

He gives you the coordinates and you arrive at a small house near the ocean. You remember Amanda from the Dodgespell tournament. Paulo quickly explains the situation to her. Her carefree expression switches instantly to all business.

"Paulo, if Nina wanted her dead, they would have just done it there. That means she is probably torturing them. There's no way the magistrate will let us just walk onto Don Nikolai's property like that!"

Paulo nods, "We'll have to go 'off the record'. The Don's oldest son Miguel, he's a reasonable man. I doubt even the Don would condone torturing a child that shares his blood, especially when Nina does not. James, will you come with us? This could be dangerous?"

"You need me. I'm the one tuned to the tracking charm on Chico. I'm going." None of this treat you like a kid crap today!

"Yes we do need you. Good work putting a tracking charm on her boy. Damn good work! If it was any other family, we could take that to the magistrate and get authorization to search the grounds. Once we are there, we should be able to use it to home right in on the boy. Amanda, take him outside. I need to use your Floo to call Miguel Colastos and see if I can convince him to let us handle this matter on the quiet. It would be less complicated if I was the only one in the room."

Amanda leads you out onto her patio and tries to make some small talk. Your thoughts are focused on the rescue mission. Last time someone you cared about was missing, you went off on a reckless rescue mission. This time, you'll do better. What have you got to work with? You have your broom shrunken in your pocket, your Dodgespell glove and a box with four general-purpose healing potions and some bandages in it. You also have a carved 'Flaming Spears of Death' rune, a bag with five hundred galleons in it, and your Curse Breaker glasses. Too bad you didn't keep your Vipertooth armor on. Plus instead of five barely trained school kids, this time you've got two Aurors!

Fifteen anxious minutes go by before Paulo comes out. "It took some doing, but Miguel will help us. He will meet us at the back entrance. He needs about twenty more minutes to redirect some of his guards and disable a couple of wards."

After being coached on the Appartion coordinates, the three of you arrive on a paved road outside a well kept and fenced in property. It looks to be the size of Hogsmeade, with one massive building surrounded by several smaller ones. You even see a regulation sized Quidditch Pitch with a couple of people flying lazily around the goals. It's nice to see that your eyesight has gotten so sharp. Being and Animagus has it's definite upsides! Under other circumstances you would love to see the rest of this property. You recall Chico saying that this place had a menagerie complete with a couple of actual Griffins. Hagrid would probably pee his pants!

A man in his early forties in perfectly tailored clothing is standing waiting for the three of you. He has dark hair, penetrating blue eyes, and a square jaw line.

"Paulo, good to see you. My sister-in-law has been spending a lot of time at one of the vacant guesthouses over there. She has told Papa that she wants to redecorate it as a project. You said you had a tracking charm on the boy. Before we go any further, let us see where it points to?"

You perform the spell and the wand spins like a compass dial in the palm of your hand. As expected, it comes to rest pointing towards the guesthouse Miguel had indicated.

“Hmm, Papa has been too indulgent of her. I have told him that this is getting out of hand. He still grieves for my brother and ignores my warnings. Her bodyguards are in my father’s employ. I have sent them on an errand. They will be gone for several hours. We need to get going before the guards make their rounds. Nina should be the only one there. The sooner we take care of this, the better.”

Heading up to the guesthouse, you flip on your curse breaking glasses. The house lights up like a Christmas tree with size expansion fire suppression and other mundane runes, but out on steps you see some temporary stuff.

“Stop!”

“What?” Everyone looks at you.

“There are temporary intruder wards set up, there, there and there. I’ll cancel them.”

Three quick spells and no more alarm system. Bill would be proud of you. The four of you enter the ‘tiny’ twenty-room guesthouse.

Paulo asks in a whisper, “Where do you think she would have them?” The pointer charm points Northwest.

“Other side of the house. Lock the front door and follow me.” Amanda slides in behind him and Paulo motions for you to follow, as he covers the rear.

“James keep an eye for more wards.”

You follow across floors of fine marble and rooms filled with elegant statues, portraits, and a room filled with hunting trophies. Yeah this place needs redecorating like you need more manipulative people in your life! Miguel picks up his pace and steps opens the door firing a disarming charm.

“Accio wand. Nina, you have no shame!” You hurry into the room. The sight sickens you. Karina is chained to a post and Chico to a chair. She’s been roughed badly. She’s bruised and badly beaten.

You hear Paulo’s voice. “Stupefy.” Good stun the bitch and take her in. The last thought that crosses your mind as the stunner hits you in the back and you slump forward is, ‘How come he just hit me?’

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“Welcome back James. Thank you for joining us.” You pick yourself up off the floor, while listening to Paulo’s greeting. You don’t have your wand. You see it on a table next to the door. There’s an old man in the room he looks about as disoriented as you do.

“What is the meaning of this Miguel? Treachery from my oldest son?”

“Ah, dear Papa, I grow weary of waiting for you to turn over control of the family. I’m afraid I have to make a change.”

“You’ll never get away with it! The rest of the family will test you with potions. You won’t be able to lie your way out of it.”

“But Papa, I’m not the one who is going to kill you. This little boy is. When they ask me if I knew your killer, I can answer and say I have never met him before. When they ask you if I plotted against you, well this was all Mr. Vangelder’s idea. He is my screenwriter. I shall be your director tonight. I have a very nice little drama to unfold. Didn’t you always say I had a flair for the dramatic?”

The ponce strutted around the room. “Our cast is assembled and it is time for the players to take the stage. We have our damsel in distress and her son. Then there is the young foreign tourist, distraught over his lover’s disappearance. He’s an apprentice Curse Breaker, you know? Managed to sneak in here to try and rescue them. Slipped by some of our wards. I’ll have to make a note to strengthen them. He burst in here to find that the jealous Nina had them prisoner. In his rage he tries to kill her, but the grief stricken head of the Colastos family throws himself in the path of the deadly curse to save his

daughter-in-law. That's when I burst in here with two members of the Policia de Magia and avenge my father. I suppose I will need to pay a fine and Nina has already decided to seek intensive therapy to overcome her grief. A terrible crime of passion, is it not? The public will talk about it for years to come. Most importantly, I have answers for every question the family could possibly ask me. Just because I cannot lie, it does not mean I have to tell the entire truth. It was one of the first lessons you ever taught me, Papa. Are you not proud of me now?"

"Why Paulo?" You ask. It's a simple question. You don't feel like listening to the Malfoy clone over there. He apparently needed more hugs as a child.

"Nothing personal James, just business. Mr. Colastos will need a set of private bodyguards. Amanda and I are looking for a career change. The money is right. I warned you that it was dangerous to meddle in local affairs. I'll probably have to use that memory in pensieve testimony during the official inquiry. Don't worry, you'll be under the Imperius curse. It'll feel pleasant. You'll be dead before you even realize it."

You look at Amanda, you notice she has the bag with five hundred galleons you were going to give to Karina. She smiles at you and drops the bag into her pocket. "Sorry kid, it's a rough world out there."

You lower your eyes and try to look defeated. In your mind, you're already working on a plan. You'll play along until you get your wand back. Someone will be trying to control you. Someone else will be controlling the old man. It's not good odds, but you'll have the advantage of surprise. Miguel is ranting at his father like some two-knut villain from a bad novel. You don't really care. Let's get this show on the road. The 'director' is in for a rude awakening when his star starts to ad lib.

"Imperio!" The calm feeling of euphoria tries to take over. You shake it off like a bad joke. Paulo is no Dark Lord, but he is the most dangerous opponent in the room. What he is about to be is one dead motherfucker. 'Nothing personal, Paulo. It's just business.'



“What curse should I have him use?”

Tell me what is the most lethal curse you can cast?

Oh what to tell him? You're tempted to say 'Wingardium Leviosa' and see the look on his face. Instead doing your best 'Looney' impression you answer in a dreamy voice. “Reducto.”

“Hmm, that should do it. I am ready Mr. Colastos. Nina stun those two for now. We'll finish them afterwards. You'll have plenty of time to play with Karina after we're done.”

Nina responds by walking over to Karina and casting a spell causing her wand tip to glow white hot like a brand. “Oh yes. The little whore and I will play. I'll make her watch me kill her spawn, but for now I will settle for burning her some more.” Karina screams as the wand tip burns her cheek adding more scars to mar her pretty face. You concentrate on your plan and not Karina's screams. The only thing you could do right now is transform. You could probably kill one of them before they got you. You need your wand.

After burning Karina on her face and several other areas of her body. Nina finally stuns Karina and the crying Chico. The poor boy shouldn't have to see that. Nina definitely dies tonight too.

Miguel wraps up his little insulting little speech to his father. No wonder the Don wasn't in a hurry to turn things over to this tosser! He probably watched The Godfather too many times! Nikolai Colastos is placed under the Imperius curse.

Miguel goes back to his 'director' mode as they go to the other entrance about ten meters away. Nina and Amanda are standing by the bewitched Nikolai and the stunned bodies of Karina and Chico. You are at the door where you had come in. Miguel nods to Amanda who casts the Imperius curse on the unsuspecting Nina. Amanda then joins them in the back of the room.

“Oh, poor Nina. Did you actually believe me when I said you were going to be a partner in all of this? You get to die just like everyone else. You're too much of a loose end, an unstable one at that. Papa

dies for you and you and our little foreigner duel. He kills you and we kill him. I apologize for not sending you this last minute change to the script. Now, the moment we've been waiting for – action!”

Pick up your wand and cast the Reductor curse at Nina Colastos.

You reach towards the small table grabbing eleven inches of holly and raising the wand. You're about to do one of those 'great and terrible things'. These people need to die. Dumbledore was wrong. You don't have to hate to be a killer. You just have to have the right mindset and the willingness to kill rather than be killed. You could forgive them trying to kill you. Far too many people have already tried. These aren't the first. They definitely won't be the last. The old guy over there is probably just as much a criminal as his scheming son. He's probably done enough unsavory things in his life to justify what his son is doing to him. Karina and most importantly Chico are innocents! That you can't forgive.

People think they know the real Harry Potter. They don't. You are still discovering him yourself. Most want to define you by the image they sculpt in their minds – whether they call you hero, glory seeking prat, delusional menace, or the light's ultimate weapon against Voldemort. They are wrong. One thing you've learned in the last month is that Harry Potter is a survivor and your survival is on the line here and now. It's time to roll the dice and make your move. The fates are watching. Times up! Someone's going to die.

You spin your wand towards Paulo and utter the words that a month ago you wouldn't have thought you could ever use – even against Tom Riddle.

“Avada Kedavra!”

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Author's notes – Discussion on my Darklordpotter and Fanficaauthor's threads. We are one chapter away from finally reaching the events of Chapter 1! The story has come full circle and Harry is almost the person you glimpsed at the beginning.

Disclaimer – You're Harry Potter. The Magical 'Godfather' reject and his two crooked Aurors think they have you under their control. They're planning to kill you and frame you, but not in that order. The woman who helped make you a man and her son have been tortured and don't look so good... and to top it all off, someone named JKR owns your Universe. Hell, you didn't even come up with this disclaimer. Someone named Cubdom did.

Acknowledgements – I'd like to thank everyone in the Alpha Fight Club (IP82, Nukular Winter, ChuckDaTruck, Cubdom and Jcmqk6), who contributed to this chapter. Thanks a bunch to those who commented on the chapter preview on DLP and FFA. It is going up without beta so don't be afraid to tell me what lousy skills I have.

Date – Friday, August 9, 1996

## Chapter 16 – I'm a Snake When We Disagree

The look in Vangelder's eyes is priceless. You saw him and Amanda don armor before you left. Armor doesn't stop a killing curse. If they had bothered to open the door at the back of the room, they would have more room to maneuver. Guess the director should have had a stage manager to help him set up his scene? Good for you – bad for them.

You should have known the bastard would go for one of his favorite Dodgespell moves. He throws Amanda in front of your curse. Normally, he would use Reese. It sucks to be her, right now. You don't even have time to process the look on her face as the curse hits her. Oddly enough, it works in your favor. The curse relies on you really wanting that person dead. You probably didn't hate Amanda enough. She sprawls to the ground. What did she say? 'It's a rough world out there.' The wave of nausea passing through you is distracting and discomfoting. You've didn't feel that when you used Crucio on the Goblin. Maybe there's a limit to how much Dark Magic you can tolerate, but that's a topic for another time. Better switch over to something you're used to and can use with impunity.

"Paulo! What the fuck are you doing?"

The director obviously doesn't approve of your ad-lib. You're already moving. Paulo casts a cutting curse you recognize as one of Collins' favorites. You know just what to do. "Pello et Engorgio!" It's a mild banisher combined with an enlarging charm. You use it on the small end table where your wand had been. The table is banished towards Paulo as it swells in size. Kwan would be proud. 'Stupid kitty cook waste magic casting shields! Uses less energy to use items around you to make solid shields. Block opponents view! Don't stand there and look like idiot! Cast spell while they can't see!' Shit! Even your inner monologue sounds like Kwan now. Either way, it's right. The swollen table eats Paulo's curse falling in separate pieces.

"Tonare! Motherfucker!" True the last part isn't really part of the incantation and you have no real idea, nor do you care who is warming Paulo's bed at night. Still, it's the thought that counts.

Chaos is a good thing. Paulo shields your curse. Damn, he's quick! Then again, so are you. You send your cutter and a bludgeoner to keep him on the defensive. The cutter collapses his shield and the bludgeoner thunks him something good! That door they needed open is now in its correct position. They can thank you later. Don Nikolai is still under the Imperius curse, and he is wrestling with Nina for her wand probably on Miguel's orders. Miguel is .... Shit! "Protego!"

Damn! Ow! Ow! Ow! You just got your ass blown back out in to the hallway! Miguel is cursing your dumb ass. Fucking blasting curse. Fucking half-ass shield! Where's your wand? Answer, on the ground back in the room! Actually, that's wrong now. It's flying through the air towards the little magical mafia prince – how nice. New plan, run like hell! If the fates are still watching, perhaps they should step into the kitchen and grab and snack, use the loo, and come back again when you are winning.

"Get him! The doors and the windows are sealed. He has no wand and no way out!"

You scramble into a kitchen and head towards the next room. Two options grab a weapon from the kitchen, or become a weapon. You transform. Let's see dragon hide stand up against what you can do.

“Come on, Black!” You hear Paulo’s shout. “Even if you could break the windows or the doors, you’d never make it off this property alive!”

You head through the dining room and learn an interesting lesson – polished marble floors and about one hundred kilos of accelerating feline are not a good combination! You smack headlong into a pillar. Well at least you know that cats can see stars too. Next room has books and carpet. Better traction. Focus Potter! Don’t go all feral now! Need to find place to ambush meat – Paulo. Paulo not meat! Paulo is enemy. Kill Paulo Vangelder.

Where to go? Upstairs? High ground? Leap onto Paulo and crush his skull in your jaws? Let him come up and attack him on the stairs? No wait! Trophy room! Lots of dead meat there. Play like dead meat. Let Paulo come to you. Kill Paulo Vangelder.

You slink into the trophy room and go for the corner that can see both ways into the room. Big bear is standing on hind legs. Dead meat doesn’t smell right. Doesn’t matter. Be rigid like dead meat is! You force your body to stay still. The anticipation is building. Want to flick tail back and forth. No. Tail stays still! You want this kill more than anything you’ve ever wanted. Timing is critical. He needs to see a trophy. Enemy coming. You choke back the growl.

“Give up now, it will be less painful. Miguel! Wake the girl and her boy. Perhaps their screams will flush him out.” Your enemy mutters. He tries to be quiet for a minute, but you can hear him. Eventually you hear him grumble, “Fuck this. I’m going to make you suffer now, boy!”

You were wrong, now you want this kill more than anything. Vernpig called you boy. You could kill him too, if he was here. Some other time, different hunt. Screams from where you came from. More enemies to hunt after this one.

There he is! He’s looking around the room. Don’t look back! You push down instinct to attack. He moves loose and free. Enemy is used to stalking his enemies. Paulo is close now. Back is to you. He thinks you are in tiny room – closet. He thinks you are in closet. He pulls door open. Go now!

Your rigid muscles uncoil and you close the distance. Enemy is a killer too. He feels your presence. He was fast in the other room, but now you are faster. You slam headfirst into enemy and drive him into the closet. Claws scrape against scales. Paulo wears dead dragon skin. Teeth find neck. Blood! Enemy flails. Arms smack at you. Backlegs rip at areas not protected by dragon scales. His screams are more of a muffled gurgle. He stops moving. You let go of his neck and see that it is still barely attached. Spitting is a foreign act in this form, but you manage to clear most of what is in your mouth while staring into Paulo's lifeless eyes. You could spend some time enjoying this, but there are others to be stalked.

You look at his body for his little stick. Get his stick and use it. No. Dead Meat's stick is broken. What now?

While you plan the next move, something occurs to you – clarity. It has to have been at least four or five minutes now and you still have a pretty good idea what is going on. Well, as much as you always do, but this is an improvement.

You've accepted that you are a survivor and a predator. It's what has been holding you back all along. People are born. They live for a time. Something or someone eventually kills them – that whole 'Circle of Life' and 'Ashes to Ashes' crap. If necessary, you can be that someone or something. Thanks for the lesson, Paulo. Class dismissed.

You move back to the kitchen. Man like Malfoy would head towards the center of the room to curse others. The door you were blown out of is closer to enemy. Not so fast on smooth floors!

Above the screams of the boy and the woman, you hear shouting. "Dammit, Vangelder! Haven't you gotten him yet? Pappa, keep your wand on Nina." He says more, but the magic allowing you to understand him ends. His words don't matter. He dies next. Marble turns into carpet on wood. Gain speed – go faster. Three strides, two strides, one stride, now! Go faster. Leap and kill. Crush skull. Rip stomach. Fast kill.

You transform and scoop up the dead man's stick. The man with the wand is coming out of his fog, when the woman snatches her wand back.

"Reducto!" You dodged but it still hits you. Knocks you across the room. Hurts, but not too bad. Still regaining your wits. Need to cast spells. Mind still a bit sluggish. The old man rounds on her. They are struggling. Boy is crying. You toss the wand away and return to your animal. Who cares about spells when you can do this!

Your animal form rips the woman from the man's grasp. Her whining pleas cease seconds later as you maul her. The man looks between you and the nearest wand on the ground. You shake your head at him. He holds his hands palm out to you. You leap to your wand and transform. Holly and phoenix feather wand is back in your grasp. Mind clearing. Man is saying something.

"Speak in English," you say. It will be a minute before you can cast the translation spell. Need to work on adjust? No work on adjusting to changing back. Must practice.

"I am sorry. I did not realize that you do not speak Portuguese. So, what happens now Mr. Black?"

You pause to buy yourself time to form the words. "I came to save these two. That's all I ever wanted." You gesture towards Karina and Chico. The mind is mostly clear now. You go ahead and cast the translation spell. Chico can't understand and he is scared. Your wand releases them both from their bonds. They haven't hurt the boy too much, but Karina falls over to the ground. She's been hurt – badly.

"I see."

"What do you want to happen now, Mr. Colastos? You do realize that you owe your life to me?" You ask moving over to look at Karina and cast a few basic healing and pain numbing charms at her obvious injuries. "Don't worry Chico, we'll get your Momma some help."

"You were saving yourself. There was nothing in your actions that created a life debt."

You consider his words. "I think you are bluffing."

The old man looks from the bodies of the dead auror, to his son, and finally resting on his former daughter in law. "I suppose at the very least I owe you a debt of honor and my gratitude for uncovering this nest of vipers. Hmmm, we must devise a suitable story. Nina had those two kidnap the governess and her son. Nina and the other one are related. They tricked you into coming. Miguel and I tried to stop it, but Miguel was killed in the crossfire."

"Why not the truth?" Interesting game, he is refusing to acknowledge the life-debt.

"No, an attack against me by my son is weakness. Being under his control, even for a moment, is weakness. No, it is best this way. Now, tell me who you really are? There is no James Black from England. Nina asked me to find out about you."

"Karina and Chico need healing and I need your assurance that you don't intend to dispose of them as a part of this story we are concocting."

"Are you not concerned about your own welfare?"

Apparently, he needs what Collins referred to as some good old-fashioned bitch talking. "Take a look around. I just killed four people, three without my wand. You're still alive because you aren't my enemy. Karina and your grandson are under my protection. All of us can walk out of here nice and peacefully, or I can kill you and anyone else who tries to stop me."

He obviously didn't like you mentioning Chico's actual status as much as he didn't like you bringing up the life debt. "You do realize, who you are talking to, Mr. Black?"

"Most would consider you a very powerful man. I see a man without a wand and a choice to make. Your story will be more convincing if you have a willing witness."



“We have a deal. Healing and care for these two and safe passage for you. May I summon my people?”

You spare a glance at the weary looking Karina. She’s on the ground with a death grip on her crying boy. She nods clinging to the hope that her ordeal is over. You aren’t quite convinced yet.

“Do I have your word of honor?” Honor seems to be a popular currency in this part of the world.

“Yes you do.”

You gesture towards Nina’s fallen wand. He picks it up and sends off a communications spell. “They will be here shortly. A healer will be with them.”

A quick walk over to Amanda’s body and you retrieve your back of galleons. You check her over, wondering if your curse was strong enough to kill her. Maybe, like that one movie that you always laugh at, she’s just ‘mostly dead’.

Nope, no need to go find ‘Miracle Max’ – she’s good and dead. “My people will arrange the scene to fit the story I give them. I recommend that you cast at least ten additional spells to remove the residue of the killing curse from your wand.” You look on as Nikolai casts the killing curse with Miguel’s wand. Killing an already dead body. You move over to Karina and Chico and perform a series of medical diagnostic charms, heal a few bruises and transfigure a teddy bear for Chico.

Karina looks only marginally better after your work. You’re not really much of a healer, are you? She tells you in a shaky voice to wipe the blood from around your face. You hadn’t really noticed. The guards and healer arrive. He instructs three of them to transport the Machados to the infirmary.

Nikolai asks you to remain to assist in preparing the crime scene for the authorities. He introduces you to Frau Blucher, his personal assistant. The thin and wispy woman is just shy of five foot with a grandmotherly demeanor that reminds you that sickly-sweet, smug

bitch who calls herself Bill's mother. She and Nikolai confer in a quick rapid-fire exchange of either German or Bulgarian. Too bad your spell only handles English to Portuguese. The tiny woman listens like a patient parent hearing her child tell them how they were put in detention at school.

Her tone reminds you of someone on the telly discussing a baking recipe. "Well dears, I suppose we should start by bringing the fourth body in here. Where did you say you left him? The closet in the trophy room? Thank you. Mister Juarez, do make sure to sanitize that area. Better vanish the carpeting in the closet. Up in the attic, there should be a something you can throw down to replace it. Now, let's see, these two were mauled to death? What was it and who conjured it?"

"He is an Animagus." Nikolai gestures towards you.

"Oh my, aren't you a fierce one? And you got the other one too! I guess they weren't expecting that were they? Mr. Juarez set the body down over there. Is the head still attached? I don't think we should let the PdM know your little secret. Don't you agree?" You only nod as the scene has taken on a rather surreal quality. The three bodies are mended and their gaping wounds closed. She makes a bit of fuss over making sure that the wounds you inflicted are healed. She reminds you of Petunia chasing you around the house complaining about your cleaning before company arrives.

The Frau, who has a completely neutral expression on her face, levitates Nina's body. "I always thought this one would be trouble. Mr. Black, if you would, stand there and hit her with your most powerful cutting curse."

You comply tossing out one Collins taught you called 'The Bone Saw'. It cuts Nina's corpse in half and gouges halfway into the column behind the body. It draws an appreciative look from all the parties in the room.

Madame Blucher, whistling a little tune uses Paulo's wand to cast a trio of reductor curses into Miguel's repositioned body in a tight grouping around his heart. Even going so far as to inspect the blood

spatter patterns on the wall. Nikolai is handed his wand, which he uses to 'kill' Paulo. Two curses were sent into the protective armor and then a 'lucky' piercing curse that sends a cloud of gray matter flying into the far corners of the room. The creepy grandmother from hell pronounces the scene is to her satisfaction. You shiver to wonder what kind of gore fest wouldn't be to her satisfaction?

The three of you go over the story quickly and after everyone is on the same sheet of parchment, the Frau leaves to summon the PdM and probably check on some human spleen muffins she has baking.

While you wait you decide to ask, "What will you tell Renaldo's other children?"

"For now, I will tell them that their mother betrayed me and suffered the consequences. If they wish to know the details, when they are older, I will bring them to the room and show them that column. I will tell them that the man, who killed their mother did that and it would be unwise to seek him out."

You've gained a modicum of respect for the man, "Are you going to acknowledge Chico as your grandson?"

He thinks for a moment. "There would be scandal in acknowledging the boy."

At least he is considering it. Perhaps a bit of flattery, "You are one of the most powerful men in this land. Surely, you can survive a minor scandal? One that would fade so quickly."

"True, very true. I will also need a maternal figure in my other grandchildren's lives. They were very fond of Ms. Machado. They will keep their current governess, but if I am to acknowledge the boy as a Colastos, then I must acknowledge her in some form. I will speak to her when she has recovered about her role in my family. I doubt she will refuse. What of your association with her?"

"Whatever she and I had is over. I went to her house today to give her enough money to leave and go somewhere beyond Nina's reach.

She is a good woman in a bad situation. She will be better off under your care.”

You remain apprehensive until after the Policia have left. The Brazilian Aurors don't ask too many questions. You can tell they know there is more to the story. You can also tell they know not to pry too deeply. It's a strange game of cat and mouse. The head of their Department is Nikolai's sister and is married to their Minister of Magic. For once you find out what life is like on the other side, mingling with those who work amongst widespread corruption. It's like having Lucius Malfoy on your side. Riddle must get this kind of satisfaction every once in awhile. Hell, Snape has given you more difficult questioning, when he thought Funbags might have helped you with a potion!

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Two hours later, you are in the infirmary at the main house. It's nice, probably better equipped than most hospitals. Poppy would be in heaven. You cast a minor privacy charm. It should be enough, you hope.

“How are you doing, Karina?” You sit next in a comfortable chair next to her bed. Chico is in the next one, but has already been given a sleeping draught. He wasn't worked over too badly. Brightly colored salves dotted marks on his face and chest. With any luck, in five years, when he goes to school, no one will be pointing out any scars on his body like he was some kind of fucking animal on display! Whoa there! No bitterness on your part, eh? Karina is another matter. Those diagnostic charms you ran on her indicated a lot of injuries. Nina really hated Karina. The healer must have used a paintbrush to apply the salves. A half full potion rack sat on the nightstand. Sadly, you recognize and or have imbibed most of them during your short but eventful life.

“I can't... I can't feel my legs.” She stammers in a choked reply. Some of the nastiest damage she had received was to her back. The restraints had been the only thing keeping her up.

“What did the healer say?”

“She said that the damage isn’t permanent, but it may be weeks before I can walk again!”

“You’ll be safe here. Whether he chooses to admit it or not, he owes me a life debt. He knows it. I know it. He didn’t go into all the details, but he said that he would be willing to acknowledge Chico as his grandson. Until you are able to, the governess will look after Chico. After that, Nikolai implied that you will have a ‘minor role’ in the family.”

You have to get her some tissues as she begins crying. In between sobs, she manages, “You have the debt of the most powerful man in South America’s and you only wish him to provide for my family?”

“I may have a few things to ask from him later. I’m still new to all this, but for now, that is all I need.”

It takes a few minutes for her cries to subside. You feel very uncomfortable, but hold the one hand that isn’t regrowing bones. She regains her composure and regards you fiercely. “I also owe you a debt for myself and my son. I will do anything you ask of me, anything! I will walk again. My scars will eventually fade. If you will have me, I am yours, without conditions and without reservations.”

It takes you a minute to find the right words. “I’m flattered, but I can’t accept. Bringing you further into my life would endanger both you and your son. I have enemies – ones that make these look like a bunch of two-knut thugs. You can repay me by raising your son, keeping him from becoming arrogant. Teach him right from wrong and to resist the corruption goes with this new life. Raise him to be a wizard people are proud to know for his character and not his connections.” You hope Chico won’t turn into the next generation’s version of Draco Malfoy.

She listens to you. First she looks hurt by your rejection, but then it changes to understanding and finally wonderment. “Who are you really? He said there was no James Black.”

“I will not say my name. If questioned under a truth potion, you can say that you only ever knew me as James Black.” You remove the sticking charm on your bandana. Taking her one usable hand you use her index finger and trace your scar hiding beneath Fleur’s waterproof makeup. It had held up during your ‘shower’ escapades with Karina. Her eyes open wide in recognition and she whispers several colorful curse words that make you smile.

“You are a good woman, Karina. You deserve a life that rewards you for being a good mother to your son. You won’t find that life with me. It would be too dangerous for you and Chico.”

The two of you continue to talk. Eventually, you can tell that her pain is getting the best of her and convince her to take the sleeping draught. One of the men waiting outside the door escorts you to a dining room, where you share a private dinner with Nikolai.

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Two hours later, you reappear in your hotel room. It took awhile to convince Mr. Colastos to allow you to return to let Bill know what has transpired. You offered to send an owl, but being in a normal hotel, it did not seem appropriate. Nikolai also warned that owls are not really considered secure communications in this part of the world. He had privately acknowledged his debt to you telling you that such things are not spoken of amongst other people.

You have to think about what he can do for you. He seems rather eager to discharge his debt to you. Bill will probably have some good ideas. You grab a quick shower and change clothes rubbing some of the salve that the healer gave you on the nasty little curse burn from Nina’s reductor.

Minutes later you are dressed again and you knock on Bill’s door. Fleur’s voice answers, “Come in....”

You open the door as she completes her sentence, “That must be a new speed record, even for you Mr. Weasley. Oh, Harry...”

You can only stare at the naked part-Veela tied to the bed with silk ropes. A giant charmed feather is um, well you don't know what exactly the feather is doing, but it is the luckiest feather on the planet!

"Harry! Snap out of it! Use your wand and cover me with zee sheet!"

Her shriek shakes you out of your stupor. It takes a moment. Your wandwork seems mighty slow tonight doesn't it. Fleur's full body blush isn't helping matters either. Hey, she shaves! Finally, she's covered although the feather is still assaulting her even through the sheet – lucky sheet.

"Bill charmed zee feather. I do not know zee countercharm." She's obviously embarrassed and her accent has returned. Hell, you want to know the charm!

"I'm sorry. I just needed to check in with Bill." You manage to tear your eyes away and stare at the picture of dolphins jumping out of the ocean. It's a nice picture.

"Bill is at the grocery store picking up some things. He will return in a moment." Fleur starts laughing. You don't want to look, but you have to look. The feather is tickling her arms and face.

"Maybe I should wait next door for him and you could send him over to me?"

"Nonsense, Harry. Come over here and sit on the bed."

You'd rather not. "I'd rather not. Don't you want me to untie you?" Bill and Fleur are downright freaky, aren't they?

"Come. Sit."

Not sure why, you walk over towards the bed. Your plan is to sit on the corner of the bed and stare at the door until Bill returns. Your plan turns to shit when the moment your ass touches the bed and all your clothes vanish. It's just you, your wand and nothing else! Fleur starts howling with laughter. Bill's fucking warded the bed! At least you noticed the tingle of the ward activating.

You scramble off the bed and run into the bathroom, while she continues to laugh. "Not funny Fleur!" This only causes her to laugh even louder, damn freaky wench!

"As many times as you have zeen me naked, I figured I should return zee favor! It was a rather large joke, yes? Well at least larger than most from what I saw. You're clothes are in the closet out here. Bill modified the ward."

"What did I do? What is going on here?" You hear Bill's voice. Shit things just got worse.

"Harry is naked and in the bathroom. He stopped over for a visit and I tricked him into triggering your ward. You should sunbathe more Harry! You're buns, zey are white and pasty when zey should be toasted!"

You hear Bill laughing in other room. "So, let me get this straight, I come back to find my fiancé naked in bed and Harry Potter naked and hiding in the bathroom! I need to owl Rita Skeeter!"

You grab a clean towel and wrap yourself up in it. "Laugh it up you two! I'm coming out with a towel and my wand. Are we going to be grown ups or are we going to be a bunch of giggling schoolchildren?" Honestly, you'd think that you were the oldest of the three people in the hotel room.

"Oh, come on out grumpy McPotter and celebrate our engagement. Wait! Give Fleur a minute to cover up."

"I thought you two were waiting to go to the Family vault in Paris?" You lean back against the door while listening to Bill and Fleur scamper around the room. Bill mumbles something and Fleur smacks him and tells him to disenchant that damn ostrich feather.

"I got tired of waiting for William. I picked my four favorites and brought zem here. He picked one and proposed about an hour ago. You can come out now Harry. I have a robe on."



You come out with a towel wrapped around your waist. Their laughing expressions change when they notice the salve covered curseburn on your chest.

“Harry, you are injured. What happened?” Apparently, Fleur hadn’t been looking that high when you made your naked dash to the loo.

“Wrong end of a reductor curse. The healing gel and a pain potion are taking care of it.” You mutter nonchalantly on your way to the closet to retrieve your garments.

“And?” Bill adds all business now.

“And I had to kill several people tonight.” Fleur gasps.

“Who?”

“Nina Colastos right after she did this. Paulo and Amanda from the Dodgespell tournament and the son of the most powerful wizard in Brazil.” The expression on their face is one of disbelief. You gesture at the pensieve in the corner and Bill nods. You pull sufficient memories to get them up to speed and head back into the bathroom to put your clothes on. After dressing, you wait patiently snacking on one of the bananas Bill had brought in. A quick inventory shows bananas, strawberries, whipped cream, chocolate syrup and vanilla ice cream. There are plastic spoons, but no oddly no bowls. They really are a pair of perverts, aren’t they? You put most of it in the tiny refrigerator in the room. More than likely, your exploits will be seen as a tremendous mood killer. You ended the memories with you and Nikolai talking before his assistant and the rest showed up.

Five more minutes goes by before they come out of the pensieve. Fleur is visibly shaken. Of course she just watched you use the killing curse and savagely kill three other people. She has all the talent in the world. You remember her showing off for her friends during your fourth year. She lacks the killer instinct. It’s probably a good thing. The world could use more Fleur Delacours.

Bill shakes his head. “How are Karina and Chico?”

“Chico is as good as to be expected. Karina is in a bad way. She's in the infirmary at the compound. The Aurors have already been and gone. Colastos' sister heads their department. Her husband is the Minister of Magic. They didn't ask too many questions. I need to get back there. I promised Karina that I will keep an eye on Chico for at least tomorrow.”

“Are you sure it's safe?”

“He has granted me sanctuary at his property. He owes me a life debt. I'm as safe there as anywhere else, but if by chance something happens, send Kwan and Collins.

“The part with you in Jaguar form was less hazy.”

“I've reached 'Clarity'. Thundercloud will be pleased.”

“You used the killing curse.”

“I am a Jaguar, a predator, a killer. Death takes many forms. Paulo's betrayal pushed me past the point of wanting him dead. I probably couldn't cast it on anyone else in the room. If Bellatrix or Riddle were here, I could probably do it again, but not against anyone else. Next time I run into Riddle or his Death Eaters, they won't know what hit them.”

“Are you sure, you're okay?” Fleur managed to ask. The sincerity of her concern strikes a chord in you.

“I won't lose any sleep over them. I'm sorry I ruined your engagement celebration.”

Bill answered. “Don't be. We'll get back into the swing of things soon enough. I want you to check back in every day. Take as long as you need there, but don't overstay your welcome. Having a marker to call in on him may come in handy down the road.”

“I'm already trying to think of things, maybe you can give me some advice on what I could possibly ask for?” You search around for

something to change the subject. "So, have you decided on a date yet?"

"Probably sometime next summer. You need to start working on the best man speech."

The statement somewhat floors you. You're a little choked up. "Really? Why not Charlie?"

"The job is for the 'best man' not the 'best brother'. Besides the best man needs to be able to fight off all those Delacours, when I steal her away. They wouldn't be afraid of Charlie unless he had a dragon. Hell, most puppies wouldn't be afraid of Charlie. You on the other hand..."

You laugh it off, "You do realize there is a chance that incidents like tonight may somehow find there way into my speech?"

"Merlin, I hope so!" Bill says with a guffaw. Fleur seems to have recovered her composure and is smiling again.

"Oh, and what about Sanchez's little disillusionment charm?" You see Fleur raise her eyebrow questioningly. You guess Bill failed to mention that one.

"Hmm, maybe I should reconsider this? Nah! You'll have to make sure and include my revenge on her."

"You haven't gotten revenge on her."

"Yet, the operative word is yet. I haven't gotten revenge on her yet."

"Whatever. Seriously, congratulations to both of you. You're already great together. I expect you'll be even better. I've got to run and you need to start doing whatever it was you were doing." You put the memories back into your head momentarily reliving them in vivid detail. Your heart is racing by the time you open your eyes again. They both give you a moment to reabsorb the memories. You smile at them. Bill gives you a manly hug and Fleur kisses both cheeks. As you turn to leave you see Fleur pushing Bill backwards onto the

warded bed. Thankfully, you Apparate before you see more of Bill than you ever wanted to.

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You never realized how much time is required to take care of a young boy. Then again, you lack perspective, as being locked in a cupboard doesn't really demonstrate how to go have fun and play. Chico is a non-stop ball of energy and then, without warning, he wears out and becomes a complete grouch in an instant. So begins your pattern of wearing him down until he and sometimes you need a nap.

You wonder why Frau Blucher can't watch him, but then you remember all those stories that are told to children about old witches, who eat little children. She's German. There was that Hanzel and Gretel story. You wonder if there is any truth?

When you checked back in with Bill, you were able to get your journal. You have made yet another critical blunder. You left an angry witch waiting for an answer. Three letters were waiting for you. At first, you were worried you would say something stupid. All of Friday, you were a little preoccupied with that trivial little murder plot.

Harry,

Daddy is rather angry after Umbridge's visit to the paper today. I overheard him on the Floo talking to one of his friends. They are talking about shutting him down! He may actually have to move his publishing operations outside the country!

From what he was saying, the case against her had been virtually thrown out for lack of evidence. Didn't you go to Dumbledore about what she did to your hand? A couple of people came forward, but all she got was an official reprimand in her permanent record.

I see you haven't found time to write back to me. If you need help starting, I recommend the line "Luna, I am sorry I am a git." It's a good and rather believable start.

Luna

That one wasn't too bad, though you resented the implication that because you weren't there Umbridge got off with a slap on the wrist. If you ever catch up with old Delores, you'll happily give her more than a slap on the wrist. Sounds like the toadbitch is trying to ingratiate herself to Scrimgeour.

Harry,

So another day passes and still no reply. Apparently, I have somehow offended you. Well let me tell you something, the world does not revolve around you! Other people have problems too! Maybe you're so wrapped up in yours that you don't stop and think about it enough. You keep saying how I hide behind Looney. I do not! Why would I? What do I care about what a bunch of self-absorbed teenagers think about me? Do you care what Crabbe and Goyle think about you? Looney doesn't care what all those shits say about her. I don't care either.

But you, you care about every little insult. All Malfoy has to do is come into the room and look at you cross and the two of you are ready to go for your wands. Here you're saying I have self-image problems.

Get over yourself,

Luna

Things seem to be headed downhill rapidly, don't they? Unfortunately, she's not done yet. You flip back through some earlier letters. Nowhere did you come out and directly say she hides behind 'Looney'. It sounds like her conscious is getting to her.

Harry,

Since you are obviously too busy for little old me, I figured that I should drop you a quick note to inform you that I may also have to cut back on writing. I had the pleasure of escorting Daddy to St. Mungos, where he has had a bit of a breakdown. So now I am trying to help the managing editor try and decide how to keep the paper running,

take care of Daddy and guess what. My permit for the use of common household magic has been rescinded. I can't even use my wand to cook a meal or do the wash. Amazingly enough, the name on the bottom line was Delores Umbridge. I have to go get Mrs. Fawcett to come over if I want something hot to eat.

The reason I say go is strangely enough, our Floo connection has been taken out of service and I am still trying to find out why. I'm told that we are on the list and it should be up soon.

Luna

You responded and hoped you could stop this runaway train in its tracks.

Dear Luna,

I'm sorry I haven't been able to write back. I hope your Dad is getting better. Things have been really hectic around here. I'm helping my friend Karina out. It's not an excuse for neglecting you.

At first I didn't write, because I was concerned that I would write something stupid and upset you further. From Friday to today, I was separated from my belongings. I have only just gotten them and I saw that not writing has upset you even more.

I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life. Be Looney. Have fun. Just know, that around me you don't have to be Looney. You can be Luna. You don't have to be odd or funny, or strange. You don't have to 'entertain' me to be my friend. I don't know if that came out right, but hopefully you know what I mean.

Sadly, I don't think my presence would have done anything about Umbridge. When I gave the interview to your father, I named every Death Eater who came to the graveyard. Did the Ministry do anything about it? Have they done anything since Scrimgeour took over? More than likely, Scrimgeour threw her a bone and now can count on her support and loyalty. She might be making your life miserable now, but I was her personal mission last year. She was one syllable away from using an unforgivable curse on me!

Sincerely,

Harry

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The next day, you are circling the Quidditch pitch on a borrowed broom with a more cheerful Chico on your broom. You try to maintain your mood, but a certain blonde English witch and her journal entries are starting to get to you.

Tomorrow the governess returns with her two other charges. Chico is pretty nervous about seeing his older siblings. Nina had sent them away. Except for your brief reports to Bill and Fleur, your day has been occupied with a precocious five-year old. Parenting isn't your strong suit is it now? Still he's a good kid and once upon a time, you were a goof off. It seems like a long time ago, doesn't it? The menagerie was impressive. Real griffons make Buckbeak look like someone's pet pony.

While looking at them you notice that you were automatically wondering how to stalk one. They're too big for a head on approach. You could come in from the side just over the wing. Yes. That's it. The side is the best approach. The wings would be in the way, but it would also be in the Griffon's way. The one you are looking at gives an angry screech and stares at you as one predator recognizes another. The staring match continues for a minute until the Griffon loses interest and looks away. You'll want to talk with Thundercloud about this more.

Snapping back to the present you land the broom and hoist Chico off of it. You stow the broom in the locker by the pitch. "That's enough for today. Why don't we see what the cook has for us and then go see your mother?"

"Mr. Black?"

"Yes, Chico?" Merlin only knows what question he's going to ask now!

“Do you feel bad about killing those people?”

Shit! Now you say something the lemon drop sucker would come up with. Still, you and Karina had both wondered when he was going to want to talk about it. You secretly hoped it would be around his Mum.

“Chico, killing a person is something that should be avoided at all costs. If you and your Mother weren’t in danger, I wouldn’t have done it. I’m not proud of it. I am proud that I saved you two and your grandfather. Remember that as you get older. Money and power aren’t worth hurting someone over.” It’s a bit of a lie and rather over simplified. You would have killed Paulo anyway, but Chico doesn’t have to know that.

“Okay, Mr. Black. Can you turn into a jaguar and let me ride on your back again?” Lessons in morality fade quickly for a young boy, who knows you can do a neat trick. You move slowly across the pitch with the little boy on your back. Soon he is urging you to go faster. You merely pick up the pace to a slow trot enjoying the warmth of the sun and the squeals of childish pleasure coming from the little meat – err boy on your back. He’s pulling on your ears, again.

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Hours later an exhausted Chico Machado is sleeping. Karina took her sleeping draught as you carried the boy to his room. You’re enjoying relaxing in the elegant guest suite. This is living! You’re not really sleepy, another possible side affect from your Animagus form being a nocturnal predator. It has a hot tub the size of a small pool in it! Bill and Fleur would probably drain it and fill it with jell-o or something and get down to business. A quick glance with the curse breaking specs shows it is coated with calming and relaxation charms. That set must be for temperature control and that one seems to be the one releasing all the pleasant aromas. It’s a mighty fine piece of work! You want one.

Things seem to be on the upswing for you. That alone should be cause for alarm shouldn’t it? You slide into the hot tub and open the glowing journal. Is it just you, or is the glowing a bit more intense?



You open the journal to see how your olive branch was received.

Harry,

It's nice to hear from you. I was considering taking my journal back to the store to have it checked to see if the charms were defective. Thank you so much for responding. I'm a little preoccupied right now. I've been reading the wonderful article in the other paper, detailing my father's stay in St. Mungo's and his history of mental illness. I'd hate to read what they would print if they didn't 'wish him well' on his recovery.

Guess what fun I had today? They finally hooked up the Floo again and I already had a visitor from the Ministry. Mrs. Peterson stopped by to inquire about my home life and whether the Ministry should step in out of consideration for my well-being! I was able to get my Uncle to come over to remind the Ministry that I have relatives, thank you very much.

So, what exactly were you doing for your friend Karina? With anyone else, you mention them by name. Whenever you mention her, she's always 'a friend' or 'my friend Karina'. For example, you say that Maria Sanchez showed you a nifty modification to a rune scheme or Collins showed me how to add more power to my cutting curse. When it comes to her, you say 'I helped ward my friend Karina's house and she showed me how to make some local dishes. We had a nice night.' Care to elaborate? We Ravenclaws tend to notice interesting patterns like this. It's almost like you are hiding something or be intentionally circumspect? So if we are so into mind healing these days how about you explain that one to me?

As for understanding 'what you mean', I am afraid that I do not. I didn't realize that all this time you were humoring me or that I was 'entertaining' you. You did get one thing right though, proving that even a blind niffler can occasionally strike gold – you most certainly aren't going to tell me how to live my life.

Aren't you the one always bitching about how your friends betrayed you? Then in the next letter you're telling me how I should 'drop the

act' and make some friends. Exactly how much good has that done you!

Sorry, I don't have the luxury of fleeing the country when life gets too rough.

Luna

Apparently, Luna doesn't care for olives or olive branches. From the looks of things, she took said olive branch, lit it on fire, and attempted to stick it ... – well let's not go there. You don't particularly care for your 'punching bag' status. You wonder where her insinuations with Karina are going? Last time you checked, you weren't dating Luna. Almost makes you wish you had never mentioned Karina in that one letter. Since then, you haven't really mentioned her that much. When you finally got a chance to discuss this with Fleur, she seemed to believe that Luna is trying to push you away before you get much closer to her. Fleur's expression softened and she warned you that your situation with Luna is likely to worsen before it gets better.

Luna,

That fleeing the country crap is out of line and you know it. I'm sorry you're having a rough time of it lately, with the Ministry trying to screw with your life, trust me, I know all about that! Still, why are you taking it out on me? You've got problems too. We both do. Mine have been trying to kill me. I'd go into details, but I'm pretty sure you don't want to read about it and right now I'm in no mood to write about it.

You're reading too much into my letters. You need to calm down and relax.

Yes, I was helping Karina out. She's injured and her son needed looking after. Is that a problem? She's a nice person and her son Chico is a riot. I am also a very good friend of Fleur Delacour.

As for my old friends, we had some good times, but apparently, Dumbledore met their asking price for betraying me. Part of having friends is the willingness to open yourself up to the possibility of being

hurt. I've got a few new friends. I didn't let it get to me to the point where I dismiss the possibility of having friends.

I am your friend, but lately it seems like you are just looking for any reason to tear into me. I get that the Ministry is trying to strong-arm your father into cooperating. One of the few things Dumbledore warned me about is that the new Minister would try and 'recruit' me as a spokesperson. What have they ever done for me?

Harry

Is it tempting fate to wonder how much worse it will get?

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Author's notes – Happy Holidays to you all. I had hoped to finally make it back to chapter 1, but the chapter was slow developing. We'll get there next chapter. Luna is not handling the stress of her life very well and that will be the focus of the next chapter along with Harry's training. Visit my discussion threads at DLP and FFA. Jim

Disclaimer – You're Harry Potter. For the last 16 chapters and most likely before that, you've been Harry Potter. You're a fictional character that is owned by JKR. No one, least of all you, is making any money off this story.

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Date – Monday, August 12, 1996

## Chapter 17– Just Say a Word and the Boys Will be Right There

It's Monday morning, you say a tearful goodbye to Chico and promise to come back and visit him. Karina is slowly getting better. The healer says she'll be able to move about in a magical wheelchair in three or four days. Your uneasy alliance with Nikolai Colastos continues to build a slight trust. Most off all, you're happy to be away from The Frau.

Opening the journal, you look at Luna's response.

Condescending Pig,

You never cease to amaze me with how you can turn any situation into something about you! I forgot that you're king of the rough times! You always hear about the sad and tragic story of Harry Potter! Well I've got a story for you, how about the story of a nine year old girl, who interrupts her Mum's little experiment and causes an explosion that ends up killing her Mum! Then she gets to watch her Dad slowly go insane and know that it was all her fault! You and Neville didn't know your parents. I did. So pardon me if I consider the two of you lucky.

After all that, I get to read an annoying letter from you telling me that I should relax and that I'm being too sensitive. Sorry, I'm not used to being used as leverage against my father.

Write back. Don't write back. I don't really care right now.

Luna

The friendship is just about at rock bottom. She's lashing out and you think that she's finally cutting loose with the real reasons she hides behind 'Looney'. Luna is angry, very angry. In a way she did get the worst deal. One parent had been instantly taken from her and the other one going away piece by piece. To make matters worse, she blames herself! It's a good bet that Looney is there to prevent her from ever getting close to someone. She's trying to drive you away, whether she knows it or not.

You have to decide whether you have time for this right now? How do you feel about Luna? She's sweet when she wants to be. She has a sarcastic sense of humor that you can appreciate. She also has quite a few problems and she is throwing a major fit.

A few minutes of deep thought and you decide to keep writing and see what happens next.

Dear Luna,

You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened to your Mum. You were nine. Kids don't understand that Mum and Dad need to be left alone. It's not your fault. What was your Mum doing practicing experimental magic in the house in the first place? People normally have shielded labs for that kind of thing, don't they? Why didn't she spell the door to keep you out?

You're being too hard on yourself. You're taking it out on me to prove that you don't need anyone in your life. In two years when you're out of school, are you really going to stop using 'Looney'? Do you even want to? Hiding from your pain doesn't make it go away. Hiding your feelings away just makes you numb.

I wouldn't be much of a friend if I turned my back on you now. Maybe you should write to Professor Flitwick. He might be a good source of help. I've never had much luck talking to Professor McGonagall, but it might be worth a shot.

Sincerely,  
Harry

You put the journal in with the rest of your stuff and dress to leave. You make certain to stop and pay your respects to Don Nikolai before leaving. He has arranged for you to be allowed to come visit a couple of times this week. He's also considering a few of the requests that Bill recommended. Most of them aren't important until you are preparing to head back to England, so they aren't an immediate need.

You Apparate back into your hotel room and scare the heebeejeebies out of the housekeeper, who thought the room was empty, oops. Fortunately, she was running the vacuum cleaner and didn't hear the crack of your Apparition. You read the note that Bill left for you. He and Fleur have gone to the Bank. The rest are checked in to the Dancing Dolphin.

After the housekeeper leaves, you slip your armor on underneath your clothes and head over to the magical community. You swing by Karina's shack and notice a cleanup crew is on site repairing the damage. You wonder if there's a 'for sale' sign already up at Amanda's?

At the Dolphin, you meet up with Kwan, Collins and Thundercloud. You use a chunk of your five hundred galleons to rent a private dueling chamber with target range. The two Hitwizards put you through a grueling workout as Thundercloud looks on. On a break, you describe in detail the battle at the mansion. Collins opts to go head back into Rio for some 'action' and to see if he can find a private gun club to take you shooting. You discuss your newly acquired 'clarity' with the two remaining wizards over a light lunch.

"I cannot use the killing curse without nausea either. The other two, I can use with no problem." Kwan admits. You find it odd that a Hitwizard can't use it. You recall Collins tossing it out like a stunner.

“Forgive me Kwan, but you’re a Hitwizard?”

“Stupid cook growing up. Two weeks ago you would have been whining ‘but you’re a Hitwizard?’ Now, you ask question with respect.” Sadly, he did a passable impersonation of you whining. “People are different. Some people good at charms, some turn into animals, and some use killing curse without side affects. Besides, many other ways to kill other than that curse. Require more skill, yes, but that is why I teach you. You killed four people in short period of time. Surprise and luck were on your side. You were better trained then they thought you were. Every fight comes down to surprise, luck and skill. You cannot guarantee two of them, so you must learn skill and hope it’s enough when the other two are not on your side.”

Thundercloud jumps in, “Harry, one thing that stands out is that even in your animal form, you wanted to kill Paulo. Needing to kill is a primal instinct for food and survival. Wanting to kill is what we mistakenly call, ‘higher thought’ processes.”

Not really sure that you understand, “But what about the first fight with the Goblins? I was fighting for my life there too?” Hmm, lets see Dragon, Goblins, Goblins and Colastos ambush. So far you’ve managed to accumulate a life or death situation roughly every seven days. This isn’t a good trend is it?

“You didn’t hate those Goblins did you?”

“No. Not really.”

“Then there is your answer.”

The attendant setting up the fresh targets for your afternoon workout and clearing away the lunch plates is none other than Sheila Lopez. She seems happy to see you. You smile politely and avoid saying anything resembling, ‘How is Reese? Sorry his brother ended up dead. Well not really considering I’m the one that did it.’

She comes back in later on during your afternoon workout to finish cleaning the tables. You have a sneaking suspicion about why she

really came in, while you destroy several targets with powerful spells. On your way out for the day she reminds you that you owe her a game of pool sometime. You give her a little smile and say you'll take her up on that soon. You didn't really like Reese. Paulo and Amanda tried to kill you. Maybe there is hope for the last member of your team? Then again, you're a bit suspicious these days.

You catch up with Bill and Fleur. They let you know how negotiations fared, slowly. The three of you grab some dinner and you read the note from Collins letting you know that you have some time on a gun range tomorrow night after your time at the dueling club. Thundercloud wants you to sleep in your jaguar form tonight to ensure that you have sufficient clarity to start working on Occlumency and Bill just handed you some effing curse breaking homework! You smile and grumble when he tells you that the purpose and answer to this scheme is in one of the six current books you have borrowed from him. It's a good thing you don't have to cook for these people anymore. You don't have the time!

You settle back into your room and open the journal with a slight feeling of dread. Your relationship with Luna is on the threshold of becoming an unmitigated disaster. Even Fleur isn't sure you can salvage it and she's a hopeless romantic, as well as a sexual deviant. She does recommend that you 'stick to your spells' and don't budge.

**YOU COMPLETE AND UTTER BASTARD!**

You have NO RIGHT to say anything about my Mum! You weren't there. You don't know what happened; yet there you go passing judgment without even establishing the facts.

So after you finish insulting my dead parent, what's next? You suddenly grow a brain and decide that you'll analyze the source of my emotional pain and give Healer Potter's diagnosis of what's really wrong with me. Stay the hell out of my head!

Furthermore, if I am taking something out on you, it's because you bloody well deserve it! Get off your broomstick there, Mr. High and Mighty Chosen One! Who's the one hiding from their problems in ANOTHER COUNTRY? Where do you get off with the amateur mind



healer shit? Like you're so together. Teach me, oh wise savior of the Wizarding world, show me how to make lasting friendships and foster deep personal relationships.

Sarcasm really doesn't suit her does it? As much as you would like to, you put off a response in favor of Bill's homework. Fleur said Luna would probably continue to lash out and try to drive you away. The more you keep writing her, the closer she is to some kind of breakthrough.

An hour and a half later, you have determined that Bill's homework is the directions to a Nordic style magical toilet. Naturally, you looked for all these dangerous curses first. At least you narrowed it down to Scandinavian runes quick enough. Only two books to look through! Activating the last rune with two wand taps vanishes the contents of the bowl. You appreciate the humor. Even ancient ruins can have a crapper around.

Dear Luna,

I understand that you are angry with me. I've been hanging on to my belief that I was responsible for Sirius' death up until Dumbledore, Granger and the Weasleys started their little manipulation of my life. I'd probably still be a pathetic mess if they didn't give me something else to focus on.

There have been times that I blamed myself for my parents being killed. Doesn't that sound ridiculous? I'm sure Neville does too. I was one. You told me at the veil that you heard the voices, just like me. They didn't sound angry. They weren't accusing me of anything. When I thought back to that, it was partly that which helped me get over my grief.

If you want to know why I couldn't write you on Friday, it's because I wandered into an ambush. I ran off – thinking I was going to save Karina and her little boy Chico. I had two Aurors with me. Turns out the Aurors were about as crooked as the Malfoys. They were working for this crime boss, who wanted to kill his father and take control of his family. Sounds like something Draco would do! I had to fight for my life again. Kwan summed it up best. I was lucky, I surprised them

and I was more trained than they expected. I owe my survival to my Animagus form. It's a jaguar. I'll miss the little guessing game we used to play. I won't go into any details, but I'm alive and they aren't.

I spent the next few days taking care of Chico, while his Mum heals. That was when I got the journal back and began writing back.

I guess in a way you are right, I haven't really talked about Karina. She and I were pretty close, but not anymore. I was doing my 'saving people thing' and she needed help. If I hadn't befriended her, I think the people would have found a way to kill her and her son. This time I was lucky. Only the bad guys died.

Well, I'll let you go now. I hope things are getting better for you.

Harry

You close the book. Fleur's advice had been to just keep writing and let Luna address the issues on her own timetable. You doubt it could be any worse than the mess you've already created. You reread it and are satisfied with your writing. You're calm and friendly. That's about all you can do for now.

You spend a bit more time studying runes. Bill had told you that the OWL and NEWT written exams in Ancient Runes were all about simple memorization. Curse Breaking is about recognizing what type of runes you are faced with and applying research and deductive reasoning to beat them. Unless you are attacking someone's fortifications, then you have ample time to slow down and do things the right way.

The Breaker who owned this copy of Golinard's before his untimely death at the hands of the Goblin rebels, was fairly imaginative. He had a few custom schemes in his notes that were interesting. His most unique one was an eight rune combination that created blistering gas, a bit more powerful than a stinging hex, but falling short of completely recreating Mustard gas, which is what he was aiming for. Still, it's dead useful. Bill thought it was interesting since most Breakers would be expecting direct spells and wouldn't think to recheck for air purity.

Git,

Nice to see after all this time you finally admit there was something going on with you and this Karina woman. See doesn't it feel better now? All this time, I thought you were lonely there and in desperate need of friendship. Small wonder you just wrote me off as just a friend? Now that whatever the two of you had is over, I guess you thought you could come back to chatting me up? Wrong!

Of course you say that if you didn't have something else or is that someone else to focus on you'd be a 'pathetic mess'. So I am guessing that by your definition, I am also a pathetic mess? If I decide I need help and want help, it will be professional help and not some idiot like you offering half-arsed ideas and opinions.

Stop writing me. I don't want to talk to you anymore. I don't care about your life. I don't care about your thoughts or observations. I sure as hell don't care about your love life! If I never read another letter from you, it will be too soon.

Luna

Her handwriting is basically a scrawl. She isn't even talking about what is happening in her life. The whole letter is basically an insult directed at you. It's working. You're pretty angry by the end of it. So much for calm and friendly! All right, if that's the way she wants to be, well let's just see if she can take a little bit of what she's dishing out?

Luna,

Our friendship has nothing to do with whatever Karina and I had. The only times I haven't been writing you were times that I was injured or not able to get to my journal! Jealousy isn't a good look for you. For that matter, I'm not even sure what is a good look for you? You're so adept at hiding who you really are. How do I even know if you haven't been lying to me just like you are lying to everyone else?

Is your Dad back from the hospital? Is the Ministry still trying to blackmail your father? You're not even talking about that anymore. All

you want to do is write about my brief relationship with Karina. Fine, if it will satisfy you, what do you want to know? Is it over? Yes. Did we snog? Yes. Did we shag? Several times in fact.

Insulting me isn't going to get you any closer to a resolution with your problems, but if that is what you need to do to make yourself feel better, then by all means vent on me.

If you want to actually do something about your problems, you could probably mention you're situation to Fred and George. They'll be able to pass it into Dumbledore's organization. If Dumbledore is aware of what's going on, he might be able to get the Minister to ease up. I don't trust Dumbledore as far as I can banish him, but he'd probably be on your father's side.

Harry

Six hours later, as you are getting ready for the day, you get your answer.

I hate you! You disgust me. I can't even believe I actually had a thing for you! Why am I even still writing a man-slag like you? Makes me wonder if all those rumors about you were actually true? Stop writing me. It will only waste your valuable time that you could be using finding a new slut to polish your broomstick.

The following days are filled with Kwan, Collins, and Thundercloud working you like you've never been worked before. Kwan and Collins show you more varied and destructive spellchains. Some of them mix offense and defense others are strictly destructive in nature. Both of them add a few Dark curses into the mix. Nothing really 'light' about a bone shattering curse, is there? Collins smiles as he shows you a Dark variant of the Incarcerous spell that utilizes barbed wire instead of ropes. You worry about Collins.

Surprisingly enough, Thundercloud has some of the most interesting things to add. Things that are now considered Dark were not so in his youth, scalding geysers of steam and jets of acid to blind your opponent, cutters that won't heal from a standard wound closing charm without the lingering power of the spell being dispelled first and

a stunner wrapped in a vomiting hex which has the potential to make the target choke on their own bile. Even Kwan looks interested in that one.

Additionally, Thundercloud has been working with you coming out of your Jaguar form and casting spells. He promises that you will get better with time and practice. To that end gives you a series of exercises to further continue frustrate you. Now, he would like you to do some of your reading in your animal form to improve your cognitive thought processes. As if reading about Ancient Runes in human form isn't tedious enough at times. At least you figured out how to charm the book. One growl turns the page forward. Two growls will turn it back.

Furthermore, if you need to stop and take notes, you have to shift back into your human form. It seems rather tedious, but you've learned enough to know that there is a method to the madness. Especially, when you have to stop and think about what you wanted to write down. It all ties back to coming out of your form and casting spells.

Collins has given up trying to teach you to use an AK-47. You're also pretty much worthless with a pistol. By the end of the first day, you're massaging bruises from the recoil of a Mossberg 590. After he lightens it, it kicks even worse than before, but you like the destructive power. The Hitwizard shows you how to apply a cushioning and recoil charm only after you learn how to hold it correctly. Fucker spends too much time around Kwan.

You have to give credit where it is due. He knows his stuff, as he shows you proper care and cleaning of the weapon. Collins is as meticulous as Snape with a potions recipe when it comes to firearms. He whispers in reverence of fifty caliber weapons like the Barrett Sniper rifle and a Desert Eagle pistol. He actually owns the pistol and showed you damage the large caliber handgun could inflict. The Hitwizard from Texas seems to enjoy large holes in wooden and paper targets. You're pretty content with the Mossberg. It reminds you of some of the games Dudders would play on his computer and his Playstation.

You've had two visits with Chico and Karina. They're both doing better. You're glad. Chico's new room is larger than Karina's whole house and Karina is able to get around in a wheelchair.

In the evenings, Bill hands you strange and bizarre rune combinations to decipher and carve. To finish off your night, you have Luna's insults. Your war of words with her continues to escalate. You've had enough of backing down and apologizing for things that have nothing to do with Luna. It's frustrating to keep writing her, the insults are getting more descriptive. Threatening to hex your pecker off isn't something to be taken lightly!

Luna,

I decided I should answer the question you keep asking. 'Why am I still writing to you?' I'll tell you why. You might have found a real friend in me, so you are doing everything to sabotage our friendship. It doesn't 'fit' with the fake life you have mapped out for yourself. So, you think that if you insult me enough, I'll go away and you can go back to being Looney knowing that you were right and I wasn't a real friend anyway.

I think, and both Bill and Fleur agree with me, that you are letting your prank control you. You might be angry with me now, but maybe one day you'll thank me and tell me I was right.

Harry

In hindsight getting that confrontational with her has given her all the ammunition she needs to end the correspondence. She's upped the ante and is daring you to call her bluff.

Potter,

I can't believe you! Thank you? Okay I'll thank you. Thank you for being a backstabbing, traitorous little fucker! You really are a little shit aren't you? Do you even have a loyal bone in your body? Is betrayal your middle name or is it just your motto? It was so nice of you to just start discussing me with your friends? Maybe I should find someone to discuss your writings with? Ginny and Hermione are gone into

hiding until school starts, so how about I ask Dumbledore what he thinks of our correspondence?

Maybe you can't take a hint? Maybe your pea-sized brain just can't process the fact that I don't want to write to you anymore? I've had enough! So, I am going to spell it out for you in plain terms that even a thick idiot like yourself can understand. If you write so much as one more sentence, no one single word in this journal. I will owl the damn thing to Dumbledore! It's a promise, not a threat! Go ahead try me! I dare you! Maybe I'll do it anyway. I'm certain he would help Daddy out if I had information he wants.

Guess you'll have to wonder whether I'm going to do it or not.

Pleasant dreams traitor and good riddance,

Luna

That hurt. That hurt a lot. Bill agrees with you, when you show it to him. There's nothing in Bill's journal communications with the Order to indicate she has. You're too close to getting into the City of the Damned. You can't risk Dumbledore finding out now. Fleur and Bill take rooms at the Dolphin with an empty one for you there. You reregister at the normal hotel under the name of Brian Daniels. Your wallet is now a voice activated Portkey to the road outside the Colastos estate. Angrily, you shove the journal back into the trunk. You made a lot of mistakes with Luna, but then again, so did she.

Contemplating taking Sheila up on her not so subtle, 'let's go shoot a round of pool, oh and did I mention that I've dumped Reese' offer, you sit at the restaurant waiting for Bill and Fleur to arrive. The only reason you haven't taken Sheila up on her offer is the nagging feeling that somehow it would prove Luna was right and you are a man-slag. You need a distraction, badly.

"Well there's someone I hadn't expected to see again? How's the Dark Wizard hunting going?"

You look up from your plate recognizing the voice attached to the questions directed at you. It looks like your much-needed distraction just arrived. "Hello Amy, I see you came back. How's Canada? Hmmm, Dark Wizard hunting, I got rid a few of them last week. This week has been slow, but I've already made my quota. How have you been?" You reply with a chuckle. Sometimes the best lie is the truth.

"Not too shabby. School is starting up again next soon, so Daddy brought us down for one last getaway before my last year at Havergal." You vaguely recall the name of the Private Academy she attends.

"Where are the twins?"

"Oh, Heather and Melissa will be down soon enough. Why aren't I enough for little old you?" She sits down batting her eyes at you. Flirty little vixen isn't she?

A short time ago you would be a stammering mess of Neville Longbottom proportions. Now, you just flash her a grin and say. "Of course you are, I was just wondering how long I had to charm you before we would be interrupted." The brief look of surprise that crosses her face is worth it. She gives you a devilish grin. Apparently, she likes a challenge.

All too soon her sisters interrupt the little flirtatious game the two of you are playing. "Damn Heather! If you hadn't taken forever, we'd have beat Amy down here and found our friend first." The one who must be Melissa says. The nice part is this one has a perm and the other has kept her hair straight. It's much easier to differentiate between the two of them now.

"Lookey lookey, it seems like Brazil has been good to someone. We leave you down here for a few weeks and you get all toned and scrumptious." At least they don't do that ridiculous 'twinspeak' crap. Heather is squeezing your bicep like you're some kind of meat. It's odd considering how your inner animal thinks everything else is meat. You have fleshed out a bit, since your Animagus transformation.



As you recall, Amy is eighteen and the twins just turned sixteen. Wow! Three teenaged girls, you haven't met their father, but he already has your sympathy. "So has Amy asked you out clubbing yet or can I jump in here?"

"I was just getting to it, sister dear. Go find your own." You watch as Heather gives a mock pout and goes to the breakfast buffet. Melissa joins her twin, but not before giving you a wink.

"So are you up for another night of dancing?"

"I suppose I could free up my schedule this evening. What time?" You answer with a smile. Not much of a choice, gun shooting with Collins or an evening with a trio of pretty Canadians.

"Be ready to party at eight tonight – room 1214."

You smile your way through breakfast. The girls try their best to rile you up, but you seem to be holding your own. Their demeanor changes when Bill and Fleur enter. In a way you feel for Fleur. Most men drool over her and the women are green with envy. You wonder if she gets used to it. Fleur makes a beeline for you. Maybe she likes to rub it in every now and then.

"Good morning! You look well rested." Fleur pecks both your cheeks right in front of the girls. You swear one of the twins mouth 'Euro trash' to the other one. Fleur ignores it. "Introduce me to your leetle friends." She allows her accent to come out. Guess she didn't ignore it after all. You remember how much it angered you a few years ago, when she kept calling you a 'leetle boy'.

Bill comes over, "James Black, it seems Fleur and I can't leave you alone can we?" His use of your alias was probably more of a reminder to Fleur than anything else. A look of recognition crosses his face, "Just remember what you felt like last time before you think about drinking any alcohol?"

You nod at his tacit approval and introduce the Canadian trio to Bill Weasley and the future Fleur Weasley. That brings a smile to Fleur's face. It's probably the first time anyone has referred to her as that. Bill

slides a smaller table up next to yours to give the two of them space to sit.

Not surprisingly, the girls finish quickly and leave the three of you unsure of what to make of Fleur. Previously, they were all over you. Now, they seem a bit intimidated. It reminds you of how Karina acted towards her at the Dodgespell tournament.

“Fleur, is it tough for you to make female friends?”

“Oui, c’est vrai. It is almost as difficult as it is to find real male friends, who aren’t gay.” She pats your hand.

Bill jumps in quickly, “Harry’s not gay. At least I think so, right?” It causes both of them to start laughing.

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response, you twisted little perv!”

Many hours later you find yourself wondering, ‘Maybe you are a man-slag? Maybe Luna is right?’ Amy’s naked body lay under a sheet next to yours. She snores a little bit and takes something called Claritin for allergies. It was fumbling and slightly awkward at first. She insisted you wear one of those condom things. Damn things are tough to get on and really kill the feeling! It bothers you a little that she had several in her purse. Karina was definitely better in bed, but Amy was no slouch! Hell, the foreplay was even a little better or maybe it might have been you feeling that you were on a more level playing field? The animal in you likes dominance!

Too bad you couldn’t use a contraception charm on her. You did the male variant on yourself in the bathroom. The one, that Bill showed you, when the whole talk about fertility potions cropped up. It levels the playing field against the fertility potion. Thus the chance of pregnancy is again reduced to fate rolling the dice.

The charm further killed the feeling, but you didn’t want Amy to learn about the magical world eleven years and nine months from now. At least the net result seemed to please her, as you quite literally wore her out.

Snuggling afterwards was pretty good as well. So why is it you feel guilty, like you were doing it just to spite Luna? It doesn't help that Amy vaguely resembles her. It also doesn't help that thinking about Luna reminds you that she could be selling you and Bill out to Dumbledore this very instant. The fact that you aren't wondering 'What would Karina think?' amazes you. Ironical, isn't it? You're hung up on the semi-crazy girl you didn't sleep with would think and don't even really consider what the woman you had recently been sleeping with would think.

Kwan's right 'Stupid kitty cook thinks too damn much.'

The ringing telephone stirs you. Your first instinct is silencing charm. Instead you answer it.

"It's Melissa. If Amy is there, tell her Dad came by the room. Heather spilled. He might be on the way down to your room!"

Amy's already awake. You relay the message. The panic in her eyes is not very reassuring. She stumbles out of bed and starts throwing her clothes on muttering curse words. As if on cue, there is a pounding on the door.

"Open the goddamn door! Now!"

It's like one of those idiotic frat boy movies that Dudders is always laughing about. Boy caught with half naked daughter in his room by father. Poor Amy looks like she's going to panic. You've quickly moved past the initial panic and are now evaluating options. Magic is a wonderful thing isn't it? You haven't ever really practiced memory charms and now isn't the best time to try.

"Stupefy" Amy topples over back onto the bed. You'll tell her she fainted. She never saw it coming! The pounding continues as you deposit her, her purse, her shoes, her black lacy bra and her shirt onto the comfortable chair by the wall. You disillusion her and drop a Notice-Me-Not on the entire chair and it's disillusioned contents. You remember that she snores and add a silencing charm.

You vanish the condom, the wrapper and any everything else in the bin. Angles covered you pull on your shorts and drop your wand into the pocket to go see what the pounding on the door is about. You leave the shackle on the door and crack it open while toying with the notion of handing your Portkey to him and sending him on a trip. Tempting isn't it?

In your very best innocent schoolboy voice you ask, "Can I help you?"

"Let me in! Where's my daughter?" He pushes on the door straining the chain.

"Who in blazes are you and give me a reason I don't call security?" That slowed him down.

"I'm Amy's father! Let me in right now! Amy, I know you're in there!"

"Sorry governor, it's just me in here. I'll prove it!" You open the door. He pushes past you and starts looking around the room. He goes out by on the balcony. Opens the closet. Runs into the bathroom. You suppress the tiny smirk as he doesn't even notice the chair where his daughter is stunned.

Finally, he comes back out and stares you down. "I get a knock on my door and one of my daughters tells me that Amy didn't come back last night. Where is she? What have you done with her?"

He probably mistakes the expression of shock your face for something else. What he just told you doesn't quite mesh with the phone call you got – devious little bints!

"Sir, we came back. I kissed her goodnight and she left. Is she missing? Give me a minute. I'll get the rest of my clothes on and I'll help you look for her."

"I'm this close to calling the police, boy. You better be straight with me now!"

"Hey! I'm not your boy! Do you see her here? Go wait in the hall and I'll be out in a minute."

Still glaring at you, he stalks out slamming the door behind him. Time to implement phase two. You grab Amy, her stuff, and a beach towel. Taking a calming breath, you Apparate down the alley behind the hotel. You wake her up and hand her the beach towel and the rest of her stuff.

“James! What happened? I...”

You fake some heavy breathing. “Listen, you fainted and I just carried you down four flights of stairs. Take this beach towel and go sit out on the beach. Your story is you got back, your sisters were asleep and you couldn’t sleep, so you sat out on the beach and watched the sunrise. Get some sand on the towel and you. Wait five minutes and come back. Go! That way! I’m going to go help look for you.”

She heads off looking confused as hell. Confusion is a marvelous thing. You Apparate back into your hotel room and grab a shirt and your shoes. He’s pounding on the door.

“Alright, I hear you. I just woke up for crying out loud.”

Her father insists on doing another search of the room. You spend a few minutes helping to ‘look for her’ when she comes back off the elevator carrying the now sandy towel. You listen to her lie through her teeth about getting up and watching the sunrise. Her feigned embarrassment at her father almost breaking your door down is impressive. It was only slightly better than the looks of the two sisters who were obviously trying to spring a trap on her.

His mortified apology to you is acceptable and he scolds Amy for not leaving a note. Her response of being an eighteen year old makes him sigh. He apologizes to you again and leads the twins off. Once they are safely on the elevator, she looks at you.

“How on Earth did you pull that off?”

You smile at her and wink, “Talent, skill, luck, take your pick. By the way the twins tried to set you up. Your dad said that one of them

came and got him. The one on the phone said he came there. I'm inclined to believe your Dad."

The misdirection immediately gets her away from wondering how you managed to pull this off. "Those little bitches! Heather was probably trying to get me in trouble and Melissa was trying to get in good with you! Apparently, they haven't learned their lesson yet."

Perhaps you should interrupt her plans for revenge, "So, are we on for tonight?"

"We'll, have to play it by ear. I'm a little sore tiger. Dad's likely to be suspicious and I'll have to ditch Slut A and Slut B, but I think it's doable." She gives you a wicked grin.

"Actually, I think I'm more of a jaguar than a tiger. Jaguars are better at stalking their prey."

"Whatever, bye tiger."

You want to shout that it's the truth, but you restrain yourself.

You catch both Bill and Fleur up on your antics. They deserve a good laugh and you have to admit it was pretty funny. "Hell, I thought when I opened the door it might be you standing doing one of your juvenile pranks. So Bill, mind teaching me how to do memory charms? I'd rather not have to go through that again. I should have an affinity for them considering how many times I've been subjected to them."

"Maybe I already have and you just don't remember?" Bill continues to laugh and smacks his leg.

"Seriously Fleur, what in Merlin's name do you see in him?"

She tosses her hair and puts on a look of mock seriousness. "Zat is zee question I keep asking myself. I will teach you the charms, Harry. I have experience using them. Many of your classmates discovered this during the tournament, though zey do not remember. It is, how you say, an occupational 'azard of being a Veela. Bill can play with the goblins alone today."

You wonder if she'll name names later, you could use a good laugh at your former classmates expense. "Thank you Fleur. Still going slowly with the Gobs?"

Bill finally shuts up. "Fourfangs is a shrewd one. He didn't like losing out on the armband last time. So far the best offer he has made is only twenty percent of the gold and they get first choice of magical items. I have to make it seem like we're just as interested in the gold. Otherwise it tips our hand. The moment he offers us first choice on the magical items, I'll take it. Fleur came up with the idea of offering them first choice of magical items not in the vaults of the Gringott's branch there and we get first choice on those. We think he would've put it in a vault. I'm going to put it on the table today. Might actually look better if Fleur doesn't come with me today. It'll make me look a bit more underhanded, like I'm going behind her back or something. They like that kind of crap."

"Should we offer up the armband? Do you even know if the transfer system will work?"

"No, on both counts. If they ask for it, I can offer it. If I offer it, it makes us look weak. As for the transfer system, we can't even go there until we have the agreement in place. Right now, all they know is that we think we have a way in and need their assistance to pull it off."

"What have you been telling the Order?"

"They think we're at the third site, another one in the Amazonia region and that we've moved our base of operations to Brazilia. If they do come, it'll slow them down for a day or two."

"Anything you need me to do?"

"Keep training, keep learning and keep making me laugh – especially the last one!"

The rest of the day passes by too quickly, most likely because Fleur confounding and obliterating portions of your memory, while Kwan and the rest looked on in amusement. She's really good, at least you think.

You get some compliments on being fairly resistant to mind alteration. Must be why Ma Weasley's gang had so many problems with it. In your animal form you are highly resistant to it. The spells are cast with humans in mind. Catbrain shrugs it off well enough. You need a better name than Catbrain. How about Claws? Stalker? Pounce? Oh well, maybe later. Who knows maybe you already thought of the perfect name and Fleur got rid of that thought?

It takes two nights to get another rendezvous with Amy Harris, but you manage to reenact a shower scene from one of those movies they show on late night TV, and Bill says fire always makes it better. Not always! Sometimes you need soap and water!

You leave those little hook ups completely on her timetable as you concentrate on the three dozen or so things that are vying for your attention. One thing that doesn't require your attention is the journal. You've looked at it a couple of times, no glow whatsoever.

All too soon, Ms. Harris and her sisters leave town. With your distraction gone, you throw yourself full time back into your training. Standing at one end of the dueling pit you look at Collins. Hack, Kwan, Sanchez and Thundercloud are seated behind the shielding wards. Well Hack is just sitting on the ground.

"You sure you ready for this, youngster."

"No time like the present. If I can't hang with you guys, I'll be leading the 'B Team' all the time." You answer Collins as he fingers his wand,

His spells come fast and furious. You start with foci contego, a dueler's shield surrounding your wand with a wedge of defending energy. You literally parry his first two curses and dodge the third – a barely forgivable African electrical discharge nicknamed 'Shock A Zulu'. You dive hard to your left and send a flare of light out to momentarily blind him. You conjure a snake right behind it and send it towards him. Collins deals in direct damage. He is powerful, but lacking in imagination. Thundercloud mixes transfiguration with elemental magic, but tires easily. Outlasting him is difficult. Kwan is simply a monster, rarely fighting the same way twice. You haven't come close to beating or outlasting him.



He blasts the snake into pieces – overkill, simpler to vanish it. You send a conjured arrow, a cloud of bees and a confundus charm in reply as your wand whips around creating a protego. You have no intention of hiding behind it. Collins powers right through it with an exploding hex. Good thing you weren't there. You learn from your mistakes. Your stunner comes flying back at you. Damn! He hasn't shown you that shield yet! He switches to wordless magic to keep you guessing, good mixture, but you've got a strategy too. Some kind of numbing charm hits your left arm. He doesn't use anything that a simple finite can get rid of.

"Tonare! Reducto! Immunda Induviae! Confundus!"

He shields the first, dodges the second, but Karina's 'Nanny Charm' clips him and his pants drop to his ankles tripping him. He shields the confounding hex, but your follow on stunner catches him, while he is trying to pull his pants up.

"Should I leave him for a while, stunned with his pants down?" You look over at the rest. Bad move, as a banisher tosses you back into the padded walls. He must have dodged the stunner! Damn!

You stagger to your feet and look at Collins holding your wand and pulling his pants up. Kwan is glaring at you.

"Do you ever listen? Is Kwan wasting his time by telling you things? When you stun someone you do what? Choices are go at like an idiot or bind your enemy and take their wand? Never assume your curses hit."

Collins tosses you your wand back. "What was that one you got me with?"

"Nanny charm, used to undress a kid with dirty clothes."

"Probably only work once."

"In a fight, once is all I need right?"

“Good point. Let me see the wand movements.”

Several hours, a few defeats, a couple of draws, and even a fleeting victory later, Bill and Fleur burst into the chamber. “We’ve got an agreement – eighteen percent of the gold and first selection of magic items contained in the vault areas. The goblins get the rest and first choice of the items from the ruins of town. At two in the morning, we all need to go to the bank. We’re going to do a trial to see if the Transfer system in the lost city is still functional.”

The predawn hours find you standing in the lobby of Gringotts. No one is in the lobby except for the expedition and a handful of goblins. Fourfangs looks you over, appraising you.

“You are the one the British are in such an uproar to find. The one know as green-eyed scarface?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about?”

“There have been inquiries Mr. Potter. Polite requests to various bank managers throughout the world to inform certain parties should you attempt to access your funds. Quite a cast of admirers you have, heads of state, Dumbledore, Members of the ICW, Death Eaters, Bounty Hunters, Hit Wizards, those who have power and those who are desperate get it.”

You look at Bill and he looks at you. You turn your attention to the grizzled Goblin before you. “Then it is truly fortunate for our business venture that I am not here to access my funds. I assume you wouldn’t have to report my presence to your superiors unless I attempt to access my account.”

Fourfangs smiles a cruel and calculating grin, “I believe those are my orders. After all, why else would you be in one of our branches? I’m glad we had this conversation, Mr. Potter.”

A crystal mirror surrounded by several enchanted lights sits on the middle of the Bulk Transfer Platform. A goblin is making adjustments to some kind of console to direct the crystal to the destination. They reminds you of the small handheld mirror that could have prevented

the entire Department of Mysteries fiasco, if your dumb arse had remembered it. The companion sits on the wall with virtually everyone else looking into it.

“Begin the test.”

The crystal disappears. You turn your attention to remaining crystal. You see the image of a bank and several shapes moving around it. Several of the goblins are chattering away in their language and gesturing towards picture. More shapes get closer to the mirror. You see the dead faces of Inferi staring back at you. The entire lobby is full of them. The mirror is pushed to the ground and partially shatters. You can still see the distorted image of the Inferi surrounding the object. The magic fails and the image fades.

The still functioning mirror is taken into one of the conference rooms. Everyone heads into there. Fourfangs listens to a group of goblins before translating. “We have several problems. The most obvious is the large quantity of Inferi there. The other issue was the state of the crystals that power the destination’s transfer platform. My expert informs me that the transfer platform will function only once more. The plans that involved luring the creatures to the platform and removing them are useless.”

Bill looked up. “We need to determine if we can be transported there. Have you made arrangements with another Bank Manager to perform that test?”

“As soon as you can provide the necessary potions to transform a troll and a goblin into animals, we can perform the test. One of yours will be needed as well.”

You start to nominate yourself. There’s a prophecy protecting you after all. Bill waves you off. “My expedition, my risk. You can come as well since you and Thundercloud will be using your Animagus form.”

Over the next ten days, you train in a mockup of a Gringotts lobby. This is it, a one way ticket into hell. Everyone will have the Bubblehead charm. Several of the Goblins expressed concerns about

methane gas build up. If the air freshening charms in the city no longer function, the results of using a fire spell could be catastrophic.

Collins puts forth the option to use firearms charmed for ammunition reloading and to prevent muzzle flash. They will work well against the Inferi. It is quickly adopted. The final composition of the assault team is decided, eight goblins, two trolls and the six of you. Hack's smallish size makes him a prime choice. You're happy to have him along. He wants to crush a lot of skulls with you.

September 1, 1996 is chosen for the date. It should be the start of your sixth year. Bill still has a sense of irony, doesn't he? Fleur has to head back to London on Order business. She says a heartfelt goodbye to you and you can only imagine the goodbye she gave Bill.

You were tempted to actually make a date with Sheila, but opted against it. Instead you visited Chico and Karina a final time. Karina is getting steadily better and Chico is adjusting to his new lifestyle.

The day finally arrives. You'll never have Quidditch jitters again. No breakfast left to try and get down. Your trunk is packed. There's nothing left to do except wait. Is this what condemned people feel? Do they feel time working against them? Well there is one thing left you can do. You pull out the journal. As you expected, she hasn't left any messages. You stopped checking after the first three days of silence.

Dear Luna,

Eventually you will read this, I am sure your curiosity will get the best of you at some point. If you want to go to Dumbledore, then do so. Bill is already informing them. It doesn't matter.

By the time you read this, we will have tried to access the City of the Damned. We're going in through the Goblin's Bulk Transfer System. We've already scryed the lobby at the other end. It's full of Inferi, hundreds of them. If we are to have any chance at all, the doors must be shut to stop more from getting in. Otherwise, we'll all be dead in about five minutes.

I don't know if the journal will work once we're in there, but I'll keep writing. Bill suspects that we will be able to transmit, but not receive messages. You may have not even taken your journal to school with you.

Luna, I'm sorry for the way things ended between us. I reread our letters and take responsibility for my words and the pain they caused you. I'm sorry if I betrayed you. It was not my intent. I hurt you and I realize that. I wanted you to be happy and I don't think you really are. You deserve to be as much as anyone else does.

Why am I writing now? I'm standing at the abyss and the view isn't pretty. I'm scared and I'm not ready to die, but it's a possibility – my luck can't last forever. If it does happen, I don't want anything left unsaid, no regrets. Does that surprise you? Practically everyone I can still call 'friend' will be going into battle with me. It's likely that some of us won't make it. If I die today, I want to do it knowing that I asked for your forgiveness and I forgave you as well.

Live a long life, be safe and be happy. I am a better person for knowing you. May the next time we see each other, in this life or the next, be a joyous occasion.

Harry James Potter

You close the journal and place it in your trunk next to food, potions, jugs of fresh water, precarved runes, books, and ammunition. Sad how empty your life looks inside this trunk. There are no pictures of friends, no trinkets of happy times, and the only things to tell someone about the owner of this trunk are a Dodgespell mitt, a journal telling a story of how badly two people can hurt each other with only words, and a Dragonfly racing broom. All in all, a bit pathetic don't you think? It makes you wonder what mark Harry James Potter will leave on this world.

At the appointed time, you place your trunk with all the rest on the platform. You set your Mossberg shotgun, holly wand, and ammunition case in their designated spots. Everyone else has the same grim expression on their faces, except for Hack. He smiles at you and you do a quick game of rock, paper, and scissors. You went

for paper and he trips you up by picking scissors, tricky little Jungle Troll, even if he was only little by Troll standards. You recognize the other troll as Glurg. You don't particularly care for him, but he was the second smallest of the trolls employed here and space is a premium.

Bill nods at you from the other side of the platform. "Well Harry, see you on the other side. I'm proud to be your friend." He holds the potion to his lips that will transform him into a cat for one minute.

"Thanks Bill, I still want to give that Best Man speech, so we both need to make it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Kwan taps you on the shoulder. "Time to answer life's question. 'You have five minutes to live. How do you spend it?' Good luck. Fight well. Don't be stupid."

Fourfangs gives everyone the count down. You and Thundercloud go ahead and transform. A wizard employed by the bank places the Bubblehead charm on you and everyone else. No time restrictions on your Animagus forms. Plenty of dead meat to see in a moment. You feel the crackle of magic that will twist you inside out and send you to a hidden city, where your destiny awaits. Everything has led you to this point. It is time to find out if you are really the hero everyone hopes you are. No phoenix is here to bail you out. No blood protection to fall back on. No extremely rare wand event to save you. If things go to shit, Dumbledore isn't showing up with the calvary this time. Oddly enough, you wouldn't want it any other way, would you?

You squeeze back into existence and see the shapes beginning to amble towards you. Shifting back into your human form, you scoop up the wand and shotgun. Your five minutes to live just started.

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Authors notes – FINALLY! We're back to chapter 1. Now would be a great time to go back and reread it. To answer a few questions, Harry's friend back in London is Fleur not Luna. He's not sure what they are anymore. The girl he was smitten with was Karina and it took

a long time to cover that disaster. Next chapter we pick up the action inside the ruins of a Wizarding city. For those of you that are curious, I expect this story to last between 6 and 8 more chapters before the sequel starts. See my story threads on Darklordpotter (dot) net and Fanfictionauthors (dot) net for lively discussion.

Disclaimer – You are still Harry Potter. It came very close in the last - or was it first- chapter, but you are alive to give or take another beating. You would definitely prefer giving; you have been on the receiving end a bit too often lately. Too bad JKR owns you. Otherwise you would probably sue JBern for all the shit he has put you through lately. There has to be a law about "Mismanagement of Property" or "Abuse of Fictional Characters". Idly wondering if you could convince Kwan and Collins to do you a favor, you should probably get up and face the day.

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Friendly Reminder – The events of Chapter 1 take place between the events of Chapter 17 and 18. If you haven't already, you might want to refresh yourself with what happened.

Chapter 18 – With Claws at Your Back to Send a Chill Through the Night Air

Your eyes pry themselves open. You could do with a bit more sleep, perhaps an entire week? Still it's not a good idea. The dreams weren't very nice. It's been said that magical folk like you are sensitive to the cries of the dead. Some of the normal folk can claim to have seen or felt one, but people or as good old Uncle Vernon would say 'Freaks' like you can regularly hold a conversation with ghosts.

So imagine being in the middle of a dead city where several thousand magical beings were killed in a short period of time? Yeah, good times – nothing like waking up in a cold sweat! Hands were reaching for you clawing at your skin. You've had your share of nightmares. Hell you've even had the infernal fucker responsible for all this in your head personally, but what you just experienced was down right vivid. Almost like reliving your mad dash to get the Bank's door closed, but



you didn't make it. The most horrible screeching is coming from somewhere? Please for the love of all that's good and righteous in the world make it stop!

"Puny James finally wake up!" Hack stops his singing. Either you're still dreaming or the Troll knows the lyrics to Hotel California. Too bad he can't sing that well. Collins told you it was a true story involving their wizard lead guitarist and this enchanted ruins in the American southwest that he barely made it out of alive. Of course, he could have been bullshitting you – again.

"Hey Hack..My name is really Harry. We've been over this." You sputter as the troll shoves a plastic bottle filled with water at you. You prop yourself up along the wall you were laying against. Bill is heading over towards you.

"Are you back to stay this time?"

"I reckon. How long was I out?"

"Six hours give or take. How do you feel?"

"Do you seriously want an answer? I feel like hell." Which, given where you are, is a pretty accurate description.

"What happened to the thumping dead outside?"

"Silencing charm. They're still out there. We just got tired of listening to it. The lobby is secured. Every so often one wanders down the steps from the offices above. You were exhausted and pretty banged up after your little hero stunt thing. We were already starting to transfigure walls and what not to force them to come at us single file, when you and Hack bum rushed the door."

Hack smiles. You should make friends with the things living between his teeth. You see them often enough. "We crush lots of skulls together. Had to crush Glurg's skull. Hack not like that."

You look at Bill slightly confused. Did Hack have to put Glurg out of his misery? Bill answers, "No, Harry. Place is swimming in Necro

Wards. The troll and the four goblins got back up an hour after they died. We had to take their heads off. If anyone else goes down, we'll have to do the same."

"Can't we cancel the wards?"

"They reappear. There must be some Master Ward that spawns new Necro wards throughout the city. It's the second most impressive thing I've seen since I got here."

Curious, you have to ask, "Okay, what was the most impressive thing?"

"Harry, you were throwing off so much energy you were glowing. I've heard of people strong enough to have a visible aura before. Kwan has too. Thundercloud says he once saw a witch in his youth who actually did it."

You feel a bit uncomfortable sort of like when everyone saw you talk a conjured snake out of snacking on Justin 'I've got a hyphenated last name', "Must have just been a trick of the lighting or something."

"Not likely. Not that much light around here and if you are wondering why your right hand is bandaged? It's because your wand was fused to the palm of your hand. You might want to polish it and clean it. It smells a bit like burnt flesh. If I had brought Fleur's pensieve, I'd show it to you. Maybe we'll get one here. It'd sure be nice to have one of our own."

You start to deny it again, but realize it's futile, too many years of the Dursleys telling you that you're nothing special. Fuck them! You rock! You kick major zombie ass! It's about damn time you and the rest of the world realizes this! "So, tell me more about this aura thing."

"Harry, do you remember the first set of ruins when you went back to get Kwan and he collapsed? That's magical exhaustion. You pushed past that point and kept going. I wouldn't have got within twenty meters of that door. Kwan said he wouldn't have got there either. You did. I watched you banish three Ineri off of Hack's leg at the same time. One of them hit that pillar three meters off the ground. If

Dumbledore or anyone else ever doubts that you're the real deal, I'll show them that memory. You want to try a spell?"

You nod your head and he summons your wand. A simple light spell is tiring, but you can do it. Kwan has walked up. You should have noticed. He usually sneaks up on you just to scare you. Maybe you're still a bit out of it. "When I collapsed, it was over a day before I could use magic again. Don't be stupid and strain yourself! Perhaps do something useful instead, like make Kwan food?"

It's tempting to try and transfigure him into something, very tempting. You holster your wand feeling a bit naked. "Where's my gun? I'm not going to stand here and be defenseless. Charm my shotgun to a new ammo can and I'll make stir fry." Kwan agrees and sets about enchanting the weapon with a reloading charm. Many of the bodies have already been cleared away. At first you think someone vanished them, but then you realize that they were shrunk instead and tossed into a hastily made fire pit. Smart move, as shrinking takes less out of you than vanishing something completely. Then again, it's not like you're out here with the effing DA at your back! There's a reason these people are professionals.

With Hack's help you get the kitchen equipment unpacked from the trunks. The goblins are inspecting the crystalline lattice that powers the bulk transfer system. They don't look pleased. They were a bit upset at not being able to use Worg, until the 'filthy human' transformation potions were fully out of their systems. Their weapons hadn't been very effective. Though, eight bears would only have been bigger snacks for the Inferi. At least you know that the potion chooses the form based on their personality types. Take that Hermy!

"You guys eat stir fry too?"

"Explain human, what is stir fry?"

"Rice, meat, vegetables and some soy sauce and sesame oil for flavoring."

“Yes.” The leader replies after some thought. Probably the first time a human ever offered to cook something for them. You don’t mind it as long as you don’t have to watch them, or Hack for that matter eat.

“Then keep working. I’ll make enough for everyone.” You’re not sure if the Gobs lost their cook, but you’d rather they work on the way to get more supplies and reinforcements here. Especially as you glance at the hopefully indestructible windows and see shapes outside.

Collins is sprawled on a sleeping bag about five meters to the left of where you’re busy working on food. He’s moaning and groaning slightly. You ignore it for a minute or two, but it’s getting louder. A look over at Bill and Kwan shows they’ve heard it too.

Collins lets loose with an ear splitting scream and sits straight up. He grabs his wand and fires a blasting curse. It smashes into the counter that you played tap dance by the Inferi horde on. Shit! A meter higher and it would have hit the bloody windows!

So much for resting your magic, “Expelliarmus!” Dazed and still out of it the hitwizard is an easy target as you blast the wand from his hand. You sag to the ground with the effort.

“Stay back! Stay back! Get the fuck away from me! They’re everywhere! The eyes! Stay away!”

Kwan is already beside him calming him down. He looks worried. “Probably happen whenever we try to sleep. Place is cursed like nowhere I’ve ever been before.”

Bill nods in agreement. “I agree. It’s worse than anywhere I’ve ever been as well. We’ll have to ration our Dreamless sleep. Maria, check the locker and see how many doses we have.”

Thundercloud helps you to your feet. “Harry and I can sleep in our animal forms. It should affect us far less. Our totems should also help counter this. You and Maria will especially need your wits about you.”

Jake Collins coughs up the water that Kwan gave him. “How much sleep did I get? Feels like I didn’t get any.”

“One hour.”

“Shit! How are we supposed to get by on naps? I hate this fucking place already! We should just stun each other!”

Bill looks thoughtful and waits for Sanchez to give him a number. “Not exactly healthy, but we’ll do that two nights and use dreamless sleep on the third night. With our Animagi out of the loop we’ve got enough of the potion to last a month.”

It looks like no one else really cares for the idea of being here for a month. Hell, by then you might actually be begging to go back to being Dumbledore’s toilet paper. Now that your adrenaline is gone, this place feels wrong. You search for the right word for a minute before it hits you, defiled. This place is defiled. It’s like living inside a cancer.

Dinner is a sobering affair, lacking the usual witty banter that you are used to. The silencing charm wore off halfway through eating and the pounding on the doors and windows resumed. Sanchez recast the charms muttering what could have only been Spanish vulgarities.

The goblins seem to enjoy your cooking, albeit with heaps of salt. Blood pressure must not really be an issue among their kind. Hack loves it. Though, you could probably dump a steaming pile of feces on top of his dinner and he wouldn’t care. In truth, it wasn’t your best effort, but under the circumstances you doubt that Wolfgang Puck could have done much better.

The lobby remains dimly lit. Bill has a hastily rigged alarm ward on both sets of steps. You’re giving Hack his third helping when the one at the far end goes off drawing everyone’s attention. Two shambling mounds of dead flesh cross the barrier. Collins pulls out his Desert Eagle and stalks towards them. At three meters, he switches to a two hand grip and proceeds to blow massive holes where there heads used to be.

“If I can’t fucking sleep then, I might as well be shooting something. Who wants to help me clear the upstairs?”

You agree to help and could use the practice with the Mossberg. Hack wants to go as well, but he's too big for the upstairs floors. Bill seems a bit uncertain about you going without using magic. He comes with. You end up taking your shotgun, the enchanted ammo box and as a last resort a Browning Nine Millimeter with a thirteen round clip. There are a total of five upstairs floors to go through, but no time like the present to start. Bill resets his wards to the top of the landing as the two move up to the second level. You flick on your magical glasses and the corridor lights up like a neon sign. You set your ammo can at the top the landing. As long as you stay within thirty meters, the gun will reload.

Bill looks at the two of you and points to the Necro Wards. "I don't have to say stay alert and be careful. I doubt they bothered to trap the upstairs, but if you see any ward other than these or the basic building wards, fall the hell back. I'll check for traps and you two clear the rooms. Put your hand on any shut door you come to. It might be silenced, but the room could be filled with Inferi. That's what we call in the trade, 'Opening Davey Jones' locker.' Don't be reckless or stupid. Both will get you killed. Alright, let's go."

You obviously don't quite understand Goblin architecture. The concept of straight lines and right angles clearly didn't appeal to them. In a way it's rather disconcerting, something akin to being in those carnival fun houses. Crazy old Arabella Figg took you once when you were seven. Made you swear up and down not to mention it to the Dursleys. Makes you wonder how much the old bat knew about what was going on. By extension, you wonder how much Dumbledore knew. One of these days old man! One of these days...

You jump at the staccato roar of the AK-47 firing. Shit! Collins could have used the silencing charm for fucks sake! Scratch two walking dead. Trash litters the hallways. You wonder if you brought the wrong Weasley with you. Old Molly Wobbles could keep the entire Slytherin House busy next summer cleaning this mess up and if the Necro wards got some of them, well no big loss, except maybe Greengrass and Davis. They're easy on the eyes. Still a pair of hardcore bints, but attractive, hardcore bints just the same.

Returning your attention to the task at hand, you step over the corpses. You turn off the glasses for a minute to rest your eyes. Bill stops every few meters and mutters a quick detection spell. "We shouldn't have any problems on the second and third levels. The fourth and fifth levels were for Gobs only. There might be some lingering wards set up by Curse Breakers for the bank managers. We'll need to get to the bank manager's office anyway. It should have a master ledger of the vaults and possibly master keys. I don't see anything out of the ordinary so far."

"Bill, where are all the dead Goblin bodies?"

"Not sure. I'm worried about that myself. My guess is they're in the tunnels waiting for us. I banished a couple of corpses towards the vault entrance and a set of wards at the entrance to the vault tunnels destroyed them. Maria is already inspecting them. Problem is dropping them might free a few hundred corpse walkers in one shot for the ultimate DJ's locker."

There's a thumping sound on the door in front of you. The door opens inwards. "How many?"

Bill listens at the door. "More than one, at least two. Fortunately the rooms aren't that big. We go on three."

"Wait! Is that one, two, three and then go? Or is it one, two, go on three?" It's an age-old argument.

Bill looks at you. Collins shakes his head, "I can't fucking believe this. One! Go!" He turns the doorknob and kicks the door open.

Four of them are in the room. Still no Gobs. You blast one, but mainly try and stay out of Collins' way. This is his therapy session. It's disconcerting how a room with four zombies in it is rather dull. Better not become complacent! Riddle might be insane, but he's not an idiot. The walking dead are only the first line of defense. He's got a sense of grandeur.

As you clear each room, Bill puts a locking charm on the door to prevent them from being reopened. Inperi from the upper levels will be restricted to the hallways. The next room has a balcony. Stepping out onto the balcony, you get your first look at Hell on Earth. Most of the buildings are collapsed. A few still stand. The streets are full of the dead. Below you there is a horde of Inperi staring up at you and reaching with their arms. Screw up and you might end up out there with them! Something is circling in the air.

"Thestrals?" You ask pointing towards the shapes in the darkness.

"No; back inside. Those look like they used to be Abraxan. Shit! The Necro Wards affected them too!" You remember the beautiful creatures pulling the Beauxbatons carriage. These look like something out of a bad nightmare. Finding the Master set of Necro wards might be a very good idea.

You edge back inside not wanting to draw the attention of the fliers. It makes you wonder what else the wards affected. Goblins used all sorts of creatures to protect their vaults.

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Three hours later, you're tired again. Floors two and three are now clear. Bill's inspecting Kwan, Bill and Sanchez are up inspecting the wards leading to floors four and five. The good news is that they appear untouched, meaning Riddle never bothered going up there. The bad news is that they appear untouched, meaning the Goblins like they privacy and took steps to protect their senior officials.

Bill told you that you could look at his mission log. You're downright curious what he wrote to them.

Dear Order,

We have discovered an entrance into the Lost City. We are attempting an assault by the time you read this. Our exit point is full of Inperi. I suspect I will continue to be able to send but not receive messages from you.



I'm taking Harry with me. Yes, you've read that correctly. I've had Harry all this time. You sanctimonious bastards! I'm disgusted that I called several of you friends and some of you family! We decided that with us out of your reach that whatever resources you have trying to find him would be better spent doing something more useful. Call off your search. You want to know something? I think he's safer with me in a cursed city then with you idiots!

Both he and I would like an explanation as to why he was treated the way he was, but I doubt anything you say will be satisfactory. Dumbledore, you can imagine my surprise upon learning that Harry didn't know what he was up against. Were you going to make him play the same guessing game that I had to about the objects we are searching for? Rest assured – he does now. It was almost as interesting as what Harry had to tell me about the item from the Department of Mysteries. Consider this my resignation. I'll work for Harry now, thank you very much. Of course, given where the money was coming from, I believe most of us are already on Harry's payroll. Oddly enough, I think I'll try a novel approach and actually help Harry train for the task ahead of him. Lupin, before you get any cute ideas about cutting our purse strings, you might want to remember where the money you are spending is coming from and what Harry can charge you with if he chooses.

Mum, Dad, what the fuck were you thinking? In all my life I have never been so ashamed of my family name. After all Harry's done for us. Dad and Ginny owe their lives to him! If you're keeping score, I do as well. Have you no shame? Fair warning – should you ever put me in the position of choosing between you and Harry, you will be very shocked at my choice.

Bill Weasley

Dear Order,

We have successfully breached our target. We sustained losses. One troll and four goblins perished. Our initial task will be to secure our landing site.

More to follow.

Bill Weasley

You know Bill is a good liar, but you doubt that he could fake much anger in his words. There was always that nagging feeling that this might be some bizarre scheme of Dumbledore's to allow you to train yourself. It was impressive how he switched from icy coldness with Dumbledore to the raw anger directed at his parents. His shot to Lupin wasn't really necessary. The raid on the ruins left you with more than enough money to run this operation into next year. The Order doesn't need to know that.

You pick up your own journal. While reading Bill's letters you think about Luna. Your last letter to her was somewhat easy. In a way it was a guilty indulgence, knowing that she wouldn't be able to respond. You were able to effectively say goodbye without any consequence. Now that you have survived the initial assault, you must decide on how to proceed now. Is it shameful of you to wonder if she is waiting and watching for the book to glow again?

Dear Luna,

We made it through. There were Inferi everywhere. I collapsed in exhaustion from fighting them. We've managed to clear the lobby and a few of the upstairs floors.

This place is cursed. It's hard to sleep. Everyone keeps waking up with violent nightmares. Thundercloud says he and I should try sleeping as our animals and the nightmares will be less intense. Our brains are slightly altered in that state. I suppose there's a joke in there somewhere, but I'll leave it to you. Also, he says that our animal totems should help ward against the evil that surrounds us. This gives more doses of Dreamless Sleep for the others. Even the Gobs are affected. Thankfully, Hack isn't. Guess there is something to be said for being a Troll?

I looked out into the cavern. Words can't really describe it. This place defines evil. I wouldn't wish this place on anyone except the bastard that created it. The wards recreate themselves! Anyone who dies is reanimated one hour after they die. Hack's friend Glurg and four of

the Goblins died. We had to destroy them later, when the Necro wards got to them.

I've got to go. It's my turn to try and sleep. I hope you are well.

Harry

Sleeping in your jaguar form did indeed dull the nightmares. They were only run of the mill terrifying dreams, instead of the full blown screaming night terrors. You stay in your form and walk around to stretch your legs.

You prepare another meal. The repairs on the bulk transfer platform continue, but without much in the way of progress.

Two hours later, you are assisting Bill and Maria with ward removal from the steps to the fourth floor. Both are very knowledgeable in warding for the Goblins. Between the two of them, the removal becomes an exercise in repetition. They let you do a few of them. Feels good to do magic again. The fourth level is completely devoid of Inferi. That should be a good sign, but for some reason that makes you more concerned.

The Bank Manager's office should have a master inventory book in it detailing the contents of every vault. Otherwise, there will be an enormous amount of vaults to open. The ledgers in the main lobby merely contain the monetary amounts in each vault. There's quite enough to go around. Everyone will be pleased.

"Here it is Harry. This is the set of wards negating broom travel inside the bank. Show me what you got!" With fluid movements of your holly wand, you begin disenchanting the series of wards that prevent broom use in the entire building. The wards are carved into the structure up in the Goblin only area. You admire the ingenuity behind it. You would've already had to control the bank to get up here to negate the anti-broom wards.

Both of the Curse Breakers look on in approval at your efforts. At least everyone can now use brooms. It will make getting up to the fifth floor much easier. For the first time in the past twelve hours you crack

a real smile as Bill climbs on that ridiculous Zambrano broom and you are treated to the advertising charm yet again. Maria uses an old Mexican broom called a 'Speedy Gonzales' after the little cartoon character. These days it would be more aptly named after the other mouse, 'Slow Poke Rodriguez.'

Now equipped with working brooms, the wards on the stairs leading to the fifth level are no longer a factor. Maybe, if you are bored, you'll come back and break them later for some practice. Thinking around the problem! That's part of the beauty behind Curse Breaking. The bloke or bird setting them up can't account for another person's imagination! Hell, the fact you all are even in this place to begin with is a testament to creative thinking. You want to give three cheers for creative thinking as Bill opens the door.

Hip! Hip! Oh shit!

At one time, the creature in front of you was a beautiful winged stallion. Now it is a thing with only chunks of leathery flesh clinging to its bones. You stuff your wand in its face and tonare the fuck out of it, blowing it and door back.

With the carcass clear, you get your first look at the fifth level. There's a reason Riddle didn't disenchant all the wards from the fourth level up.

He attacked the fifth level first, clever bastard! Gaping holes exist where the ceiling used to be. The entire level is pretty much open to the air. With this being the highest and most level point in the cave, guess where all the undead flying horses hang out? Guess who just destroyed the door and one of them drawing all their attention? Forget Davey's locker! You just open up fucking Davey Jones' corral!

You send a bone crusher into a second one. It takes a leg out, but misses anything vital.

"Harry, fall back! We'll fight them in the hallway below us!"

It's a good plan. Maria flies back down. Bill leaps over the railing and casts a spell to cushion his landing. You hop back on the Dragonfly and accelerate away from stampeding death.

The Goblin wards work in your favor as the first creature explodes. Guess you won't have to break those wards any more. You land next to Bill wondering whether you should use wand or shotgun. Wand wins out as you toss the shotgun to the ground. The wards destroy another Abraxan. The three of you concentrate your firepower on the next one. As long as they keep coming at you single file, you should be fine!

Sometimes you wonder why you have to think things like that. Karma, fate or whatever has taken such an interest in your life must enjoy times like this. No sooner than you decide that everything will be fine, life throws a wicked googly at you.

In this case the googly is the undead horses deciding that trying to get to you using the stairs was too slow. Some of them have decided to come right through the ceiling. You dive out of the way of pulling Sanchez with you as one crashes through just above you. You decapitated it but it managed to kick Bill pretty hard, sending him to the ground roughly.

"Sanchez, get Bill out of here! I'll hold them off." You begin hurling destructive spells covering your strategic withdraw. Okay fine, it's a retreat! Another one comes through separating you from the two Curse Breakers. Okay, now it's a problem. You send a pair of reductors that don't stop it, but certainly slow it down. "Keep going! I'll lead them off." This hallway is a death trap! You mount the Dragonfly and go right back up the hole the last one created. There are about a dozen still on the roof and they take to the air after you. You bank hard. With luck they'll follow you en masse. Up into the darkness and cold air you fly, tossing cutting curses over your shoulder. You catch one of them in a wing and watch it spiral down towards the city below. You flatten out against the shaft of your broom and pick up speed the ceiling of the great cavern is clear of rock formations and has a smooth almost polished surface. Thundercloud said that when he came here once in his youth that a scene similar to the Great Hall at Hogwarts would simulate day and night. Now there is nothing but the dim glow left allowing you to barely see where you are going.

The big question in your mind is what other flying creatures were in the cavern. Right now all that is chasing you is about a dozen of the winged horses. You slow to bring them closer and release a salvo of spells at the nearest one. Damn! Missed the wing and the head! This could take a while now couldn't it? Time for a new plan, stop their wings from beating and let gravity do all the hard work.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Normally a body bind on an undead creature is, for lack of a better description, a bit of a waste. That said, in this case it's a smashing idea, with an emphasis on smashing, as the first one plummets to the street. 'Today's forecast gloomy, with a prevailing sense of doom and chances of Necropegasi falling from the sky at just around one hundred percent!'

You drop horsy numbers two and three. Now that's what you call thinning the herd! It's tempting to gloat some more, but something's coming. Whatever it is, it's big and fast. It's another Vipertooth! 'Maverick! Goose! We have inbound!' Bank and head lower! This was easy with the horses you could out fly, but now you have creatures of two different speeds after you. You toss a couple of heavy hitters at the critter with minimal effects. 'C'mon Harry, think!'

You wheel around making another lap. Everybody changes course with you. You hit another Abraxan with a body bind while you wait for inspiration or the dragon, whichever catches up with you first! Those claws will cut you to ribbons. 'Okay! Calm down! It's not a dragon. It's just a big fast zombie! It won't react like a dragon would.'

"Accio Brick!" You summon a brick from a building in dire need of renovation. "Pello! Engorgio!" You banish it and enlarge it trying to literally hit it with a brick wall. It works, but it only slows the Necrodragon down. Now what? That was your best idea, so far.

You dive at the last second twisting out of the way of the Abraxan that nearly collides with you. Fuck! You roll under your broom and snap an easy body bind off at it.

Dodging occupies your next minute as you attempt to get clear of the dragon and all the Abraxan still in the air. You could fly out the mouth of the cave and have it collapse when it reaches the exit and the end

of the wards – wherever that is? But then how do you get back into the city? C'mon think! You can't Portkey or Apparate your way back either. Portkey, portkey, portkey! You can't use it on yourself, but why not try it on the dragon!

"Accio Brick!" This time instead of enlarging it, you slap a sticking charm on it and turn it into a Portkey destination the second set of ruins you explored. They should be somewhere in range. The banished Portkey hits and seconds later chunk of the dragon roughly the size of you vanishes! You need to get it on the wing! Otherwise making it lighter will make it faster and, somehow, that doesn't seem fair does it? The next Portkey misses. The one after that hits the dragon, but doesn't stick! Your luck isn't improving. You have to dodge out of the way of the closing dragon and can't catch the next brick. The Abraxan occupy your thoughts for the next couple of minutes as you dispose of two more. It's turning into a free for all up here and 'all' is still a much greater number than you would like!

The next brick you were certain missed, not that you really have time to admire your handiwork, you are a bit busy and all. Much to your surprise, it was a headshot! The cave shakes with the mass of the dragon crashing to the ground. Thank the powers it didn't hit the Bank! Several small buildings adjacent to the impact collapse. Wouldn't it be nice if it fell on the Horcrux and you could all go home?

With the dragon out of the way, you concentrate on immobilizing the rest of the Abraxan. It takes another fifteen minutes and more than one close call for you to achieve tactical air superiority. You soar alone in victory! With a big old grin on your face, you do a victory barrel roll over top of the crowd outside the bank.

Your antics dispersed much of the crowd around the bank as you land on the second floor balcony. Though they will eventually return. "That's right! I own you bastards! Who's the man! Me! I'm the man!" Damn, it's good to be alive!

"Harry, you realize that you are taunting a crowd of Inferi?" Thundercloud's voice interrupts your victory celebration.

“Don’t stop me! I’m on a roll. Everyone okay?” You give the crowd below a few more fist pumps in the air.

“Bill has some broken bones. The troll destroyed the two Abraxan that followed them back to the lobby. How are you?”

“For a change, not a scratch. Hopefully, it’s the start of a new trend. Think I should do a victory lap?”

“Do you feel that it’s really necessary?”

“Be right back!” Hell yes, it’s necessary! You take in the architecture on this trip around the cavern. Most of it is crumbling stonework. One structure fairly intact is what used to be the magical school in these parts. It isn’t nearly as impressive as Hogwarts, but no one there is going to manipulate you. Maybe kill you, but not manipulate you. It’s a Ziggurat style structure. Too bad there aren’t any windows; you could do a bit of impromptu salvage operations. You should ask Thundercloud what the school’s name is. The school has a Quidditch pitch, only four of the goals are still up and what accommodations for the spectators were once there had long since collapsed. Much of the stuff that is still standing has an Incan or Aztec look to it. A few of the buildings have a gothic look to them, Euro trash influence no doubt.

The dragon damaged what must have been their Ministry building. The Ministry, their Magical School or the Bank – those are the three biggest candidates for Riddle’s trophy case. Bill and Fleur were convinced that it would be in the bank. You lean more towards their Ministry building. It doesn’t really matter where the Horcrux is. If it’s in the city and the Gobs try and claim it, you’ll destroy it. If it’s in the vaults, you’ll destroy it. The logic has a certain appeal to it, doesn’t it?

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Returning to the lobby, you see Bill resting. Kwan patched him up. The kick from the Abraxan shattered his collarbone and bruised some ribs. He’s out of commission for a bit. You give a brief explanation of all the chaos you caused outside.



Hack gestures with his club to the two Abraxan tossed over in the corner. "Hey Hack, you crushed some more skulls!"

"Hack take care of dead horseys! Crush more skulls! Damn! Hack horny!" Hack whacks the ground with his club and looks over at Sanchez with a longing look on his face. She thankfully isn't listening. You have to admit that he has some basic needs, doesn't he? Damn, as if the nightmares weren't bad enough, you didn't need that imagery!

Two hours later, you're back on that balcony on the second level with Collins and Sanchez. You went and retrieved the Mossberg from the upper level. Currently, you are engaged in a shooting contest with the other two. Collins is beating both of you handily. It would be one sided even if he wasn't using an M-21 sniper rifle, but with the targets only twenty to thirty meters away he doesn't really need the scope. You watch him tally up three more kills before stopping.

"Why didn't fire drive off the Inferi?" It's been bothering you.

Sanchez answers, "We found wards tied to the Necro wards. The best we can tell is that they prevent the Inferi from seeing red and yellow. They can't see the fire to be afraid of it! It's impressive work."

"Damn! Wish I would have known that! I could have just made myself glow red or yellow or something."

"Do you actually know a spell that would make you turn red or yellow? I thought so. Probably wouldn't have worked. Inferi can't really see through disillusionment or invisibility, but they can still sense the living. You're way worked out pretty good. Collins! Beer!" The shrill, ugly hag barked and the hit wizard tossed her a can. Collins initially wanted to do a drinking game, but you're glad neither you nor Maria wanted to be completely pissed with his skill. "I should be down looking at the wards leading to the vaults, but Bill wants us both to do the initial survey. Hell, you should be there too Harry. You've more than earned it. You got a pair of serious cajones! You crazy little English fucker!" The hag cackles at her new term of endearment.

You smile as she chugs the can and crushes it in her meaty paw. She takes the M-21 and gets three hits, but only one kill. This triggers a volley of profanity from her.

She puts a mark under her name and hands the rifle to you. The score currently is Collins with about one hundred; he's only missed like three times. You have sixty-two, and Sanchez is at fifty-eight. You notch two more head shots out of your three attempts.

Sanchez looks on rather disgusted. "I'm going back downstairs. We're starting work on the wards as soon as Bill is up for it. You'll need as much rest as you can get."

You follow her out to the hallway and watch her head down the hall. As Bill would say, 'Golden rule – inside the ruins, no one goes anywhere alone.' Once she's on the steps she looks back and gives you the thumbs up and descends back to the lobby.

"Still got three more clips? You want another go?"

"Nah. I'll miss too much. How'd you get so good?"

"Used to go hunting as a kid. Only time my dad wasn't falling down drunk." Collins methodically mows down seven in a row before changing the clip. You draw your wand and work on matching him reductor for gunshot. You need the practice with your magical accuracy as well. He slows to match your pace.

"That's cool. I wish I had gotten to do something with my dad." You say in between incantations.

"Maybe, but not in my case, kid. I was eight. Dad was on the sauce again and beating the shit outta mom, me, and my two sisters. All I had was an empty gun. I pointed it at him anyway. I'd had enough. Did my first bit of accidental magic that night and whacked my old man with a reductor curse. The wizards came and explained what happened. Guess what my mom told them? She said, 'Take that murdering little bastard with you!' Family is overrated." He opens fire again missing the first two, much to your surprise. Maybe the psychotic hit wizard has a heart after all?

What the hell can you say to that? You'd like to think that if James and Lily Potter hadn't made the ultimate sacrifice, your life would have been just a teeny bit better than it had been. There's no sense wasting time worrying about whether or not dad would've turned you into a junior Marauder or not? This, right here and now, is your life. The only one you've got. The only person going to make your life better is you. Life has thrown a lot your way. You're still standing and you aim to keep it that way.

Instead of answering, you decide to try a spell out. You've been itching to try this one spell out in combat since Thundercloud taught it to you. It's his most powerful elemental conjuration. "Golem Mobilis!" The outward rush of magic is debilitating, but you watch in satisfaction as the earth itself rises in response to your power. It forms a roughly humanoid shape between two and three meters in height, an improvement over the ones you managed in the dueling hall. At your mental command it begins to attack the nearest group of Inferi. Hack would probably make short work of the construct with his club and superior speed, but in this instance against a mindless foe, it is more than up to the task.

It's a bit disappointing to know that, in comparison, Thundercloud's golem is more defined and quicker to respond. The only thing that makes you feel better is your conjuration looks bigger. The age old question – is it the size of the golem, or how you use it? More practice is required. Wonder if it would impress the examination boards? Hell, given the quality of instruction at Hogwarts a properly cast protego is cause for celebration!

You need some more practice before you can challenge the old Animagus to a game of 'Rockem' Sockem' golems. You can hold the spell for about a minute before you have to let up on the energy holding the construct together. The golem totters and collapses to the ground before crumbling back into the dirt from which you conjured it. You could probably add seven or eight more kills to your tally, if you were still keeping score.

Two clips and five reductors later and it's the end of the first round of Inferi Clock Tower Sniping. Collins mutters that it's no challenge and

suggests that the next round be done from the fourth floor balcony for added difficulty. You head back down to the lobby shaking your head at his comments. It's time to try and rest. There are some nasty wards to break and no telling what might lurk behind them.

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Author's notes – And there you go, a look at what is left of the magical city and the possibilities of what adventures lie ahead. Rest assured, it will not be one giant Zombie fest. Things are about to get harder for our intrepid band of adventurers...

Disclaimer – You're still Harry Potter, the Curse Breaking Animagus sensation that is sweeping through South America! The only downside is that you don't own yourself. Someone with the initials of JKR does.

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## Chapter 19 - Is It So Frightening to Have Me at Your Shoulder

September 4, 1996

Dear Luna,

It's been a busy past few days. I'm sorry I haven't really had a chance to write. We managed to clear the upstairs of the bank out. I discovered that the Necro Wards affect magical creatures as well. We ran into some stiff resistance from some reanimated Abraxan and yet another Dragon. Fortunately, it was already dead. I actually managed to Portkey chunks of it away and got lucky enough to get its head. Probably one of the best things I did all summer was have Thundercloud teach me how to make a Portkey. I'm rather pleased by my creative use for spells.

We spent most of yesterday mapping the wards that protect the entrance to the vaults and letting Bill recover from his injuries. We're going to try and breach them shortly. We couldn't find the master ledger detailing the contents of the vaults, but the copies that we located on the first floor show that most of the gold has been moved to the first five vaults.

I've started practicing basic Occlumency techniques to help me with the nightmares. Not that it's helping all that much, but it feels like I am making actual progress this time as opposed to time well spent with good old Snape. That's about the only upside to being entombed with the living dead – I don't have to see him. There's not much to do for entertainment here. Some of us go up to the balcony upstairs and take shots at the Inferi surrounding the building, kind of sad in a sick and twisted way. We've probably taken out close to 400 of the

wretched buggers outside, but it almost seems like there is an endless supply.

Hopefully, the Goblins will get there transfer system working again soon. We need more Dreamless Sleep potions and other supplies. We've handled everything El Dorko Lordo has thrown our way so far.

I hope your first few days of class are going okay. OWLs might seem tough, but you'll be fine. You've stood up to Voldemort's goon squad, some fussy ministry officials will be a walk in the park for you.

I've got to go. Bill looks like he's ready to start. Time to go do what you said I do best and go find some trouble.

Harry

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It's show time! Bill says it's where the wards meet the wands and curse breakers step up or get the hell out of the way. The three of you are tearing away at the wards. Okay, Maria and Bill are doing the heavy lifting; you're shielding them in the event of backlash. This whole damned city is thick with magical energy and it only makes sense that the Gobs would have staked out the choicest territory.

The bench you are levitating as a shield explodes in a burst of marble. The wards express their anger at being disturbed. Both Bill and Maria dive for cover from the crackling energy threatening them.

"Come on! Let's get back to it. We've got to be getting close. The first two are down." Maria said picking herself up and brushing the dust off of her.

"We need to swamp the remaining wards and bring them down. Harry, Thundercloud and Kwan - I want you to summon golems, have them carry benches for protection. Collins, cover us! I've had it with this shit. These wards are coming down!"

Everyone takes their positions as Kwan floats more benches into position. On Bill's cue, three golems rise out of the stone. The two

full-fledged Curse Breakers launch into the dispelling chants. You command your golem to grab a bench and move forward. The crackle of energy attacks the three conjurations as they surge forward soaking up damage that would have easily charred Hack to a crisp. You sneak a peek with your magical glasses at the state of the wards. It's like a fireworks display of swirling magic. All three golems vanish in a particularly violent blast of magic that leaves you partially blinded.

With a stab of your wand you recast the golem conjuration and turn those bloody glasses off! It continues to soak up the damage inching ever close to where you saw the controller runes. Thundercloud has another golem following in the wake of yours, using it as a mobile shield. A meter from the controller runes it hits some kind of physical barrier. It strikes at the flaring wall of magic managing three solid blows before it is blasted into oblivion. Thundercloud's golem is now assaulting the barrier. The defenses are failing! Kwan has another construct moving into the area as Thundercloud's is destroyed. You decide to give it a hand.

"Pello Hostis!" You banish the golem into the barrier. It hits like a thunderclap and the shield collapses. In what has been the most amazing display of accuracy you've seen in your short life, reductors from Maria, Bill, Kwan and Collins strike the area where the controller set used to be digging a small crater into the wall. You take a moment to get your breath while grabbing your shotgun and aiming at the darkness ahead of you. With the wards down, whatever had been held behind is now free.

Two long minutes pass and nothing comes out. "Harry, send a snake in there and have it scout."

You conjure a snake and compel it into the darkness. It lasts for five minutes before the spell runs its course. You really need to get some real snakes of your own! Although, sending real snakes to painful deaths isn't all that appealing. You couldn't do that to Hedwig. That's for damn sure.

Bill follows the snake with a Curious George to be certain. Snakes are careful by nature; monkeys are much less so. After it comes back out safely, Bill shrugs. "Okay, it looks like these are down and there is

no immediate threat. Everyone take one hour and relax. Hack, keep an eye on this area. If anything comes out destroy it."

Collins sits down in a chair and rests his loaded AK-47 on the ground next to him. The rest disperse. You follow Bill over towards where the Gobs are working on the transfer system.

"How long before you have it functional?"

"We will be conducting a test shortly, Human. I will advise you whether it is successful or not." The lead Goblin replied curtly before returning to his work, essentially dismissing the two of you.

"How's the shoulder and ribs holding up?" Bill merely grunts at the mention of his injuries from two days ago. He'll be feeling the soreness for weeks to come, as there are limits to even magical healing.

He continues without answering your question. "There aren't any carts and I don't trust the rails anyway. They haven't been maintained in almost four decades. We'll move slowly on brooms. According to the maps we have available, there is a landing with the first row of vaults about two hundred meters along the first line. Without the missing master ledger, my gut instinct says go where the gold is. According to the ledgers we have in the lobby, there's a lot of gold in that first section. That's where we go first, Golden Rule 'Follow the Gold'. The Gobs were nice enough to help us sort through pile of keys behind the counter to find the right ones for those vaults."

You nod your head as he continues. "I'm worried about the creatures that were guarding the high security vaults. Fourfangs had a vague idea that they had a few dragons, but mostly used Jungle Trolls, because they are so numerous in this neck of the woods. Gringotts never uses Basilisks, but they're more common here as well."

"I can call out in Parsel every now and then. If one is down there it should respond."



"Good. As soon as the Transfer System is up and running, I am going to have them send us at least six roosters." Bill said before grinning wildly, "After all, you can never have enough cock at your disposal."

"You are so wrong, Bill, so very wrong." It's a feeble joke, but with hardly anyone getting any productive sleep, it's nice to see that Bill isn't just a pervert when he is rested and cheerful. Of the sleep deprived, Collins seems to be suffering the worst, followed by you even despite your animal form. Bill seems to be holding up the best out of everyone with the rest falling somewhere in the middle.

"Of course, I'm not worried. I've got a top shelf, grade A Basilisk killer with me. Anything goes down, you'll handle it, right?"

"Remind me to fire you when we're finished here. I think I'll hire Maria to run the Curse Breaking side of Phoenix Expeditions."

Bill gives you a look of mock horror as he fishes two cans of cola out of the cooler and hands you one. You put yours back and grab something without caffeine in it. "Man, you do like older women! I'll let you explain that to Fleur, firing her soon to be husband like that. I shudder to think what my girl would do to you, or what Maria could do for that matter. Gah! I even gross myself out sometimes!"

You can't let the implication of you and Sanchez slide. This calls for some special insults. "Already hiding behind your woman, that sounds so Weasley." You wonder if Molly makes Arthur wear the uncomfortable lingerie, before deciding to abandon that line of thought before it causes a cascading mental failure in your mind.

"Oh! That was low Harry! You will pay for that. Seriously, have you considered what happens, when we're done here?"

"Not really. I suppose I have to go back to England. Dumbledore is the only one with enough clues on the location of these trinkets. Those things I have Mr. Colastos doing for me should help me level the playing field and force him to treat me as an equal. Still, I don't picture me hanging out at an Order meeting tossing back a pint with Lupin and Snape while we talk about the good times. Not now and probably not ever."

“You’ve got a point. In your shoes, I’d be half tempted to pull a disappearing act, when this is over. If you decide that way, I’ll help you plan. We’d have to figure out how to smuggle you back for the wedding. You’d probably have to do it under an assumed name. I know. You could be my good friend Zambrano Markowitz!”

Both of you laugh at the namesake of Bill’s troublesome broom before you decide to try and get back to business. “What about Hack?”

“I hadn’t planned on asking him to speak at the wedding. Why; is he your date?”

“No, idiot. Are we leaving him up here? Or do we float him down with us. If the rails are too unstable for us, it would be even worse for him.”

“We’ll leave him up here with the Gobs. If we get into a fight down there, it will probably be in close quarters. He’d be more of a liability there. Plus, I’m guessing the Gobs would feel more comfortable with him up here. Hey Harry, why don’t you get some rest? You’re looking a bit rough.”

You finish drinking the can of ginger ale and take off your vest. The transformation is more difficult with the dragonhide on. Just one of the many little tricks you are learning about your animal form. The change into your animal form is barely noticeable these days, as you curl up on your sleeping bag and pair of blankets.

Old Thundercloud built himself a little nest up by the gargoyle statues. You watch as he flutters up there and settles in.

The dreams are usually the same. In your animal form, you’re running away from all the Inferi, but they keep clawing away at you. No matter how fast you run, how far you jump, or how many you claw and bite they keep catching you. Bolting upright you are growling, except nothing is coming out – silencing charm. Someone must have gotten tired of listening to you. Collins gets the same treatment. You haven’t asked him about his dreams, but you know he’s usually screaming about ‘The Eyes’ when he wakes up.

To try and help, Bill and Kwan, who are awake when you and the rest are asleep, have taken to occasionally casting their Patronus. You do it for them as well. It seems to take more of the edge off. Prongs looks a bit less solid than he usually does. Perhaps you don't have as many happy memories anymore? Not that you're bitter or anything, right? Collins, can only do the formless mist, but he does it well. Kwan's Patronus is a Thestral of all things! You found out the hard way as you woke up to see a misty white Thestral staring you in the face. You pounced, naturally, only to pass right through it giving both Bill and Kwan a hearty laugh. Sanchez has some kind of burrowing rodent. You haven't bothered to ask what it is. Oddly enough, Thundercloud's Patronus is his eagle form.

You must have drifted off somewhere along the way. This time wasn't so bad. Collins looks like shit though. Lunch today was canned goods. Too much work to be done to do any cooking. You promise to make him something really special next time you get on the stove. Maybe if this first set of vaults is the right spot, it will be a round of dreamless sleep for everyone!

Bill gathers the troops. Everyone mounts their brooms. You still get a grin on your face every time you hear that ridiculous slogan. For a wedding gift, you should get the two of them brooms, or at least get Fleur a matching Hammer.

Everyone's ready. You still think Bill is wrong. Bill is thinking like a Curse Breaker and a Goblin. The idea is that Riddle would seal his Horcrux up in the deepest, darkest, most secure pit inside this place and surround it with wards and creatures. Bill would do that. Dumbledore would do that. Hell, Hermy F. Bags would do that. They're all logical people, not homicidal maniacs. Riddle wouldn't. He's got this whole larger than life thing going. It's probably on display in the Ministry Atrium. If you hadn't already been up in the cave, you thought he might have stuck it to the roof of the cave and put a fucking spotlight on it.

Bill goes first with Kwan flying just behind him. Sanchez is next with Collins on her six. You and Thundercloud are bringing up the rear. You could get off and walk faster than you're going, but Bill is setting

the pace and he is being cautious and meticulous. It would be nice to have something to live for, wouldn't it? Maybe instead of going straight back to England, you can take a quick tour of North America and maybe spring Amy from that 'dreadful' all-girl boarding school in Toronto for a weekend or even accompany Thundercloud back home and see his buxom granddaughter again.

Or maybe you can get your damn head back on straight before Collins curses you for bumping him again? Quit your damn daydreaming Potter! This isn't the time!

It takes thirty minutes to make those two hundred meters to the first landing, probably the slowest broom trip on record. When the passageway opens up, you are given a gruesome reminder of why caution is the catch phase of an old curse breaker.

The Goblins made their final stand here. It looks like they lost, badly. There are no intact bodies, just bones and broken weapons. Strike that. You see one skeleton pinned with a trio of spears buried into the rock with magical force in some mocking crucifixion. Shuddering, you wonder if they were 'picked clean' at some point. No one says a word for a full minute as the entire group stares at the bone yard. It must have been horrible! You feel a profound sense of loss and despair just hovering a few meters above it all.

The cavern is only about five meters high, seven or eight meters across and roughly fifty meters long. The glow from your wands provides a faint illumination.

Everyone does a quick detection for wards and nothing is found. Bill mutters while lighting a few of the torches still present in their holders, "Let's check the vaults and get out of here."

He takes the key to the first vault and places it against the vault. To your horror the glow of runes illuminates the area.

"Shit! Trap! Trap! Trap!" Bill screams. You start scanning around waiting for what is coming next. For a brief shining second nothing happens, until an avalanche of rubble descends closing both ends of

the cavern. Your exits are cut off. What's the game here? Asphyxiation? Starvation? Something else?

A voice you hoped you wouldn't be hearing for a long time fills the cavern with a deafening roar. "Fools! Did you really think I would make it so easy for you? Did you honestly believe that Lord Voldemort would stack his gold in neat little piles here for you worthless maggots? Perish knowing that these tunnels are empty and that I led you here with forged ledgers and that you carried the keys to your destruction with you." It fades off into mocking laughter as a howling wind swirls through the cavern.

The wind forms a small dust devil in the center of the bone yard. The bones of the fallen Goblins begin to lift off the ground, swept upwards by the unnatural vortex.

To your horror the bones begin connecting and forming some kind of construct. It stands four meters tall. Kwan reacts the fastest firing a pair of blasting curses while everyone else slowly begins hurling spells at it. You join in with blasting curses and bone crushers. It curls its claw like hand made from the spines of the dead and slashes wickedly at Kwan who narrowly jerks his broom out of the way. Spells slam into it, but as the bones are destroyed more simply rise from the ground and take their place!

Thundercloud conjures a Golem that feebly tries to wrestle with the nightmarish horror in front of you. It's about as effective as either of the Creevey brothers trying to wrestle Hagrid! You conjure one as well – might as well have both Creeveys trying to slow it down. It weakens your spells trying to keep the golem moving, but anything to slow it down!

"Vanish the rest of the bones before they can join with the creature!" Sanchez screams using her wand to disintegrate a nearby pile. It's a good plan and she's clearing an area when one of the conjured golems is pushed backwards violently towards her. She maneuvers her broom out of the way of the stumbling mass of earth only to be impaled by the claws of Voldemort's beast. Two of its claws stick right through her stomach and lift her off her broom. She screams in agony and blasts away at it, trying in vain to free herself.

Collins snaps of a spell he calls the Bonesaw, while your golem pounds away at the midsection of the creature. The cutter frees Sanchez and she lands painfully on the spot she had just cleared. You try and provide cover fire while Thundercloud rushes to her aid. In the unholy light from the runes you can see her spitting blood from her mouth as the Indian tries to seal her wounds.

Thundercloud's golem collapses as he tries to save Maria, leaving your conjuration as the only thing impeding its progress. It won't hold for long. The creature turns its attention to your golem crushing it and brushing the remains aside like it was a gnat. Blasting, cutting and vanishing spells buffet the creature as it surges forward. You dive with your broom trying to get between it and your two companions on the ground. You duck the slashing claw and circle around its backside cursing it constantly, while narrowly avoiding a bone shattering spell from Kwan.

You didn't buy them enough time! Fuck! The creature is on top of Sanchez and Thundercloud. Bill summons both of them out of the way. The Animagus makes it. Sanchez doesn't. As her body begins to move the creature's foot descends pinning her lower half and making her scream louder than ever. The anger coursing thorough your soul isn't the same as watching Sirius die in the Department of Mysteries. That was a crushing despair that paralyzed you. This is a burning rage to save a friend who fought beside you. Thundercloud barely transforms in time to escape the same fate Sanchez suffered, but loses his wand in the process.

"No!" You howl in tangible rage. The beast within you feeds your anger. "Tonare! Reducto! Lacero! Tonare!" The spell chain comes out in a wave of energy gouging large chunks out of the nightmare. The second blasting curse has enough energy in it to stop its forward progress. A slashing arc of your wand disintegrates the entire left arm probably saving Kwan's life. His spells joining force with yours to push the monstrosity backwards. Its clawed foot drags the flailing Curse Breaker with it. A bloodied Collins rejoins the fight. You don't even know when he got hit. It's surprising that he's even standing.

“Keep it back while I find the fucking anchor!” Bill yells above the din of explosions, while guiding his broom to the other side of the cavern, searching for the source of the energy animating the construct. You almost hope that you could push it into the vault and seal it, but just keeping it from coming forward is taking everything out of you.

It isn't about rapidly casting spells. It's about pushing as much energy as you can muster into each spell forcing the unholy creation to keep drawing on its dwindling supply of bones. Each thunderous blast is you screaming your outrage at an uncaring world. Still, the beast keeps coming ambling forward lifting Sanchez into the air with each step.

Precious moments pass as the three of you begin to give ground to the monster in front of you. “There! I've found it!” Bill yells firing a bludgeoner at the skeleton pinned to the wall. The bludgeoner rebounds off of an undetected shield tossing him from his broom and back onto the ground.

Collins screams at the top of his lungs, “No fucking shield can stop this! Avada Kedavra!” You cast a summoning spell at Bill. Curse Breakers don't use the killing curse to get past shields. There's a reason. That reason becomes apparent as the ward anchor detonates in a massive wave of energy that releases the pent up power in the shield, the killing curse and the still active ward - instantly. It occurs to you that, you're witnessing your first Cascading Ward failure. Instinctively, everyone dives into the one opened vault as the explosion rips the door off its hinges.

The sound of more rubble collapsing outside of the vault last for a few seconds and then silence descends. Kwan's already in motion tending to his injured partner. Thundercloud returns to human form and helps you with Bill. His legs are in a bad way with shards of bone embedded in his legs. They look like he had been sprayed with buckshot from a shotgun. Thundercloud takes Bill's spare wand and starts healing him. You help to the best of your meager healing skills. After a minute, you start towards the rubble filled entrance.

“Maria's still out there! We've got to get her!” Collins begins screaming and pushing Kwan aside.

“It’s too late for her. She’s gone. She couldn’t have survived. You know that.” Kwan says slowly.

“No! She could still ... She’s not ...” his protests trails off. Even you know that the Mexican is gone.

After a few minutes, both Bill and Collins are out of danger. You and Kwan still have your brooms. Thundercloud floats the unconscious Bill and all of you move towards the entranceway and begin clearing the rubble.

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On the ascent, Collins kept looking around, listening for noises and calling out, even using Sonorous charm on several occasions. This only served to make everyone feel worse. Kwan had to calm him down on several occasions. It was bad enough trying to dig out of the cave in without someone going round the twist. It finally ended when Bill woke up long enough to call off the search for Maria.

After the first hour, everyone started wearing bubblehead charms as the air thinned. The second hour was spent recovering from a secondary cave in as the party inched forward through the blocked passageway. It was almost into the fourth hour, when you finally broke through into the undamaged tunnel. Whatever might have been left of Maria’s body would remain down there, buried beneath tons of earth. If there was any power above listening to your prayers, you hoped she didn’t suffer.

Two minutes after clearing the rubble, the party floated into the lobby covered in dust, bruises and scrapes.

“Puny James! Hack was worried! Wait! Where’s pretty witch?”

You shake your head and look sadly at him. Dejectedly, you manage, “She didn’t make it, sorry mate.” Kwan and Thundercloud begin rummaging through the potion locker for various healing draughts. You slouch down onto a bench both physically, mentally and



emotionally exhausted. Hack looks uncertain about what to do or say and settles for patting your back. You feel awful.

Your eyes close for a second – or perhaps it was five minutes? “Greedy useless fuckers! You were trying to get us killed, weren’t you? I’ll fucking kill you!”

The words are enough to get the adrenaline pumping again and your eyes flutter open. Collins is being physically restrained by Kwan. The Texan is on the verge of killing several of the Goblins.

“Calm down Jacob!”

“They haven’t fixed the damn way to get our supplies, yet! They found the keys and the fake ledgers! The filthy bastards set us up! They’re gonna kill us, but not if I fucking kill them first!”

In the end it requires immobilization followed by a forced dose of Dreamless sleep to stop him from killing the four Goblins. His statements put you a little on edge. You don’t want to consider the possibility that the Goblins would betray you. Now you can’t avoid the seed of suspicion that Collins just planted.

Thundercloud takes a dual dose of Pepper Up potion, fishes out a replacement wand from his trunk, and volunteers to stay awake for guard duty along with Hack. He asks you to set an alarm ward at the entrance to the vaults.

For a moment, you stare stupidly at him before you realize that you’re the only other Curse Breaker. After taking probably twice as long as it should have, you set a simple ‘Shriek and Blink’ alarm. You don’t even bother to clean yourself up as you transform and collapse onto your makeshift lair.

The dreams are even more frightening and now include Maria’s body rising from the earth and joining in with the faceless masses chasing you. Her empty eye sockets cast blame at you. The arms encircle you. They’re closing in! You slash out with your claws, but it’s no use! They’ve got you!

You bolt upright, panting and thrashing madly. It takes a moment to calm down before you return to your human form, even longer to stop trembling. You're only slightly less dirty than when you went to sleep. For a few minutes, you use your wand to clean the clothes you are wearing before giving up and just digging out a fresh set of clothes.

You get something to eat and sit down motioning for Thundercloud to go get some rest. You pull out your journal, a few other books and your carving kit to pass the time.

Dear Luna,

I can't sleep anymore. The nightmares are too awful. The vaults were just one big trap. The ledgers were fakes and the keys were the trigger to the trap! We fell for it like a bunch of fucking idiots! We lost Maria down there. She died horribly and in pain. I don't really want to go into it. I'm tempted to ask for a dose of Dreamless next time.

I know you're probably saying right now, 'Bloody hell Harry, why mention it if you don't want to talk about it?'

I don't have an answer. Hell, I'm rereading my last letter where I sound all cocky and arrogant. I guess it's easy to sound that way, when you're not getting your arse handed to you.

When I lost Sirius, it was different. He just was hit and fell into the Veil. No body, and no sense of it really being over. They aren't even really sure what that Veil actually is! For all we know, Sirius could still be alive. Probably not, but it's a nice dream.

On the other hand, I know exactly where Maria's body is. I'd probably have to spend days digging to find it and the only solace I can find in her death is the knowledge that the Necro wards probably couldn't get to her.

Collins isn't handling it well at all. As far as I can tell, he is probably having the worst nightmares of us all. I'm worried about him. He almost killed the Goblins, when we got back. He thinks they betrayed us. I don't think so, but I can't dismiss it either and that really bothers me.

Bill's legs are in bad shape. It'll probably be a few days before he can walk again. I'm okay. Mostly, I got by with a few cuts and scrapes from digging ourselves out.

Losing someone reminded me of how trivial it was for me to be angry with you. If you need me to say it again, then I will. I'm sorry I hurt you Luna. I hope one day we can be friends again.

I'll write more later. I need to do some studying, carving, and meditation. Bill's going to need every bit of Curse Breaking help I can give him. We can't afford any more mistakes.

Harry

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Author's notes – As you can see things have gotten tougher for Harry and his not so Merry Men.

Disclaimer – You're still Harry Potter. Even if you are feeling a bit down right now. It's probably a good thing that JKR owns your rights. This is all her fault.

Acknowledgements – FairyQilan for her rapid turn around time on the beta. All the members of Alpha Fight club for the continued input that forces me to write a better story. Fasten your safety belts...

## Chapter 20 – Thunder and Lightning Couldn't be Bolder

September 5, 1996

The last few hours of guard duty have been pretty tough on you. You find yourself staring at Maria's empty cot and the trunk next to it. For some reason it reminds you of a dog waiting for it's mistress to return.

A low moan from Bill reminds you to recast your Patronus. The barely formed stag is a reflection of your own despair, but it should help alleviate their nightmares.

You return to your carving. You're stockpiling on charging and controller runes for now. For a moment, you thought you were running short on Dragon bone until you recalled the entire Necrodragon only a short broom flight away. After someone else gets up, you'll go collect some.

One of your best attributes is that you can lose yourself in meticulous and repetitive work. It helped out greatly during your indentured servitude at Number Four. Old Dudders often joked that you'd make someone a helluva wife someday. It's too bad you didn't hire Dobby. You wonder if house elf magic would allow them to breach the Fidelius and be an alternative to the Goblins. It's worth asking Bill about when he wakes back up.

The biggest problem facing the expedition is – where do you go from here? Is the gold still down in the vaults? You wish you would have been more forceful in your opinions about the location of the Horcrux. The practical side of your mind tells you that you still would have gone down there at some point and the Hit wizards say, 'The Deal would have gone just as dirty.'

The Goblins look even more mistrustful, as they continue working on the Bulk Transfer System. Relations have taken a definite turn for the worse after Collins did his rabid dog impression yesterday, complete with the foaming mouth and all. Their first test failed, which will probably only fuel the fire, when Collins wakes up.

After carving a few more runes, you start on some breakfast. You're not trying to impress anyone. It's just scrambled eggs and cheese with toast today. Ten minutes into it, Bill is awake. Yeah, he's a Weasley alright. You scoop some out onto a plate, grab a small jar of jam and take it to him.

"How are you feeling? I've already checked the wards twice and everything is still good."

Bill swallows a pain reducer and grabs some anti-infection balm. He stops and puts it back down. "If I put that on now, I'd be smelling that crap every time I took a bite. Mind grabbing me a cup of juice?"

"Sure give me a second." You might as well get one for yourself while you're at it.

"I don't remember too much of the ascent. Mind filling me in?"

"Collins thinks the Goblins are out to kill us. He might be on the verge of losing it. Kwan restrained him and Thundercloud force fed him a Dreamless Sleep."

Bill looks pretty dejected. You can't blame him. "Harry, I should've listened to you. You know Voldemort better than anyone else. I muffed it and Maria got a real estate deal."

It takes a minute for you to understand his allusion to 'buying the farm'. You're still surprisingly green when it comes to all of this. "Bill, don't start second guessing yourself. We'd have gone down there at some point anyway."

"I suppose. I've been on teams that lost someone before. She's just the first person that's been killed on a team that I'm responsible for. I

should have checked for a fucking barrier before I tried dropping the ward."

"You could have set off a cascade like Collins did. We'll never know will we?"

"It probably would have set off something, but not nearly as bad as trying to use an AK to drop a ward. Probably would have only leveled half the cave. Of all the fucking stupid ass stunts... shit! Well, nothing left to do but go through Maria's stuff."

You can't believe he just said that! "What?"

"It's the Code of the Curse Breakers, Harry. She signed up to break this place and it broke her. Anything she has that can help us is ours to use for the rest of the mission."

"Bill! We just can't go digging through her stuff like that!"

"Yes, we can and yes, we will. While we're here, it's ours to use. When we leave, we can keep it, but the Code demands that we give her family 'fair restitution'. If it had been me dead down there, you and Maria would be having this conversation about my stuff right now."

"It just seems wrong."

"Harry, the nice ones call us 'tomb raiders'. The not so nice ones call us 'grave robbers'. There's a reason for that."

Faced with that logic, you concede. After a quick breakfast, he puts on his healing balm and directs you to bring over Maria's trunk. For the next hour, the two of you disarm the numerous wards she had placed on her trunk. Giving credit where credit was due, Maria Sanchez was no slouch in the Curse Breaking department.

Eventually, the trunk is opened. Both of you look at her worn and weathered copy of Golinards. "Harry, if we both copy her notes, we will both owe her family restitution."

“I’m fine with that. Beyond this, what are our plans?” You ask as both of you start diagramming ‘Field of Screams’ – might as well skip right to the best stuff.

“It’ll be at least another seventy-two hours before I’m worth a damn. I want you to do an aerial sweep over the Ministry building. We need to figure out which location to move to next. Collins and Kwan will thin the mob outside. We don’t need a crowd following us everywhere we go.”

“I was probably going to cut up a bit of that dead Dragon and restock our supply of Dragon bone. We could use some more.”

“Don’t land unless you have to. Charlie told me that the ones that form the wings are the lightest and easiest to get to. Take a few slow passes over the site and make sure you are the only thing up in the sky. This isn’t any time to get careless. Hell, if you spot a broom shop pick up a few. We lost most of ours down there and didn’t think to bring extras. You and Kwan have the only ones left. Now, go ahead and get going. I’ll go try and smooth things over with the Goblins.”

Collins wakes up as you are preparing to leave. Even with the Dreamless Sleep, he looks haggard.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Where’s my damn wand?” His voice is quiet and slightly detached.

“I think Kwan has it. Check with him. There are scrambled eggs and toast still warm on the stove.”

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You make a slow patrol of the cave. Thankfully, nothing comes up into the air to join you. Hovering over the Ministry Building, you cast some detection charms and activate your Curse Breaker glasses. There are only the faintest traces of residual magic on the building. The close inspection allows you to see the gaping holes in the

structure, which tell the story of a building that was besieged. A vicious battle was fought here.

The building itself has a European and slightly Gothic look to it. You glide closer to the open windows looking for any indications of Inferi or anything of note in the few areas that are visible from your position. You see one shamble out onto a terrace. One quick reducto later and there are no more long-dead Ministry officials annoying you.

Of course just being out seems to be drawing a slight crowd from the street. It's going to be slow and methodical work, but the streets will have to be cleared before the expedition can move to the Ministry. There are just too many holes to plug. It's depressing news.

With a sigh, you head over towards where the Dragon crashed. It hit what you'll call the South End of the building – as if you have a finely developed sense of direction. If the building had any wards left on it, the Dragon would have set them off. It's a good bet that the building is every bit as dead as the Dragon that crashed into it.

You cut away at a section of the wing, trying to remove as much bone as possible and leaving the dead flesh there. For the next thirty minutes you cut away at the wing and harvest the long and light bones stacking them in a fairly neat bundle. When you have collected sufficient quantities to keep you occupied for the next few days, you conjure three lengths of rope, individually animating them and commanding them to bind the bones. Finally, you levitate the mass and slowly float back to the Bank.

“Nice bit of Dragon bone there, Cookie. Tell me some good news.”

“You're looking at the good news; Dragon bone and lots of it. That Ministry building is riddled with holes, so we'd better get rid of our little fan club outside before we go there. The outside of the building was pretty much barren as far as wards. The preservation charms aren't even powered. I don't know if it is a good site to continue our search. What do you think?”

Bill shakes his head. “Well we could lay out some of these wards we've been carving like a trap, conjure a bit of live bait and have



ourselves a Curse Breaking bake off. He that fries the most walking dead wins. I'll show you 'Fun with Severing Charms'. It slices, it dices, and it even makes julienne fries!"

"Hey Hack?"

"Yes Puny Ja - Puny Harry?"

"Want to help us clean off this Dragon bone so we can use it for warding?"

The troll looks at the stack of bones somewhat greedily. "Hack wants rune carved Dragon spear. Good for killing. Girl Trolls like Trolls with Spear. Never make enough to buy one. Hack clean bones. You make spear for Hack?"

You look at Bill who nods. "You got yourself a deal buddy. Just pick out whichever one is the right length and we'll fix it up for you."

Hack pulls out his 'tiny' knife – you'd call it a machete and begins to gleefully shave the remaining flesh from the bones. Once cleaned, they need to be boiled in a simple potion and that's pretty much all there is to it. The carcass out there is probably worth more than Arthur Weasley has made in the past three years.

"Have you ever made a troll weapon before?"

Bill just shrugs. "I've seen a few before. One of the trolls I met in Calcutta had a club carved from the hind legbone of a Ukrainian Ironbelly. It had a bludgeoning curse embedded in it. He claimed to have killed a Giant with it. Mostly they're, unbreakable charms, self-sharpening charms, things that make them cause more damage, nothing really fantastic. We can even get clever and make the tip ignite or embed a severing charm in it. Maybe it'll give him a real crowd pleaser. Just remember always put the unbreakable charm on last. Otherwise, you're trying to carve into something that is unbreakable. It's a mistake you only ever make once. Think about it."

You have to concede that simple bit of advice is rather brilliant and pocket that bit of information as you grab some of the purchased bone.

While you and Bill start carving, Kwan grabs a rifle and heads for the balcony to start removing some of the problems outside. Bill has you shaping some bone into a crescent shape. The severing charm will be applied to the crescent and it will be mounted on top of piece of wood at about the correct height to remove heads. Bill explains his thinking behind one of his favorite schemes.

“Typically, I’ll make three; one at head level, one for waist level and the last one at knee level. Trigger the head one first followed by the knees and finally the waist. In this case, we go for only head and chest level with no need to get fancy with timing runes. A fully activated charging rune typically powers about enough for four severing charms. The most I have ever linked to an individual controller run is five. How many charging runes have you got stockpiled my devious apprentice?”

“Seven, as well as three controllers.”

“Good. Maria had five in her stash. So, we’ve got a dozen at our disposal. You want to try duplicating that scheme from the first set of ruins? Nice time to try out Purple Armageddon, when we have an adequate supply of test subjects?”

“Sure, why not.”

The two of you stare at the sketchbook from the first set of ruins. Bill even takes a moment to compliment you on your attention to detail. You were so green back then that you jotted damn near everything down! What is ironic is back then was only slightly over a month ago.

“Is Collins behaving?” You ask, watching the Hit wizard head upstairs to join Kwan.

“There haven’t been any repeats of yesterday. He’s been kind of quiet. Might be a bit of shock? All of us are keeping an eye on him.”

About an hour of carving goes by before Bill has you engorge a cauldron and fill it with water. Hack merrily puts the bones into it and you hover the whole thing over a hastily arranged fire pit.

Bill hobbles up next to you and hands you a vial. "I've got a few more doses of the preparation potion in my trunk. Get it up to a boil and add this. You can use magical fire to help it along, but I'm going to go watch the next Goblin test. Hopefully, this one's a winner."

Kwan and Collins return while you are boiling the bone. Collins looks over at the Goblins fiddling with the crystalline structure that controls the transfer system. "We're running low on ammo. We probably need to conserve what we have left until we get some more supplies."

Thundercloud comes down from his perch and joins everyone watching the Goblins set a box filled with rocks on the platform. The lead Goblin gestures to the one at the structure who moves some gemstones over the waist-high crystal pillar. The box glows. You remember being outlined in a halo of light just before you appeared here. You make the critical error of getting your hopes up.

Managing to cast a shield, you block the shrapnel from the exploding box. One of the Goblins is hurt! You're closest. He's got rock chips buried into his skin on his arms and chest. You immobilize him to stop his loud and incomprehensible screams. Thundercloud joins you and the two of you begin cleaning and closing the injured Goblin's wounds.

You spare a glance at Collins wondering what his reaction is. He's just standing there, expressionless staring at the platform. That's not a good sign. Deciding the injured Gob deserves your immediate attention, you return to the task in front of you. At least you're getting better at this first aid stuff! Merlin knows you get enough practice.

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Hours later, the injured Goblin is resting. The other three are still inspecting the crystal pillar for damage from the explosion. They seem understandably agitated. You're on your second batch of Dragon bone, having just added the bleaching potion. Hack can handle it from here. You need some rest. The first bit is laid out to dry

and then it will be ready. Hack eagerly eyes the nearly three meter long piece, which will be shaped into his spear.

“Puny Harry bring back more Dragon bone? Next batch cost you a club. Breast bone make best shield. Hack needs good shield too. Hack’s shield shit. Glurg’s shield worse than shit!”

It’s hard not to smile as you silently conclude that Trolls who work around Goblins have the potential to become quite greedy themselves. Still, it’s a small price to pay if you don’t want to clean all this crap yourself and quite honestly the dead flesh kind of gives you the willies. You vanish a sizeable pile of it.

You walk over to Thundercloud and Kwan. “Hack’s going to finish up the bones. Do you all mind if I try and get some sleep?”

Kwan looks up. “Go ahead. The dreams are not so bad this time. Maybe, you get some good sleep? Maybe you wake up and feel refreshed? Maybe you feel like cook something other than Dragon bone? You make good stir fry. You should make that again.”

Thundercloud suppresses a chortle and nods his approval. “William asked me if I would help him with something later. I don’t have any objections.”

You shake your head at the laughing Korean for a moment before asking a more serious question. “Kwan? Is Collins okay? Where is he?”

The mirth vanishes, “Went back upstairs. Not handling things well. Saw him staring out over the city. Never seen him miss that much with his guns. He’s okay for now. If I see him get worse, I let Bill know. We may need to send him back.”

That’s some sobering food for thought. You head over to Bill. “I’m going to go get some sleep.”

“You want to take a crack at the Order? I’m at a loss for what to say to them.”

“Sure, hand it over. I’m sure I can come up with a few things to tell them. Do you mind if I tell them about your injuries? I won’t exaggerate them or anything.” He nods in approval

Dear Order,

It’s me Harry, reporting in for the injured Bill Weasley. His legs got chewed up pretty badly. He’s healing. Tell Fleur that she might not want to see his legs in shorts until the scars heal, but it doesn’t look that bad. After all, any cascading ward failure you mostly walk away from is one more than you should have.

Of course all of us didn’t walk away; we lost our other Curse Breaker down in the tunnels. We were treated to a nice prerecorded taunt from Riddle before the trap sprang. Bill’s handling Curse Breaking duties now. I’m pitching in where I can.

I’m assuming that since our little revelation that I’ve been with Bill from the get go that this little book is now in your hands Mr. Dumbledore. If it isn’t, please get it to him now so that my anger can be properly directed. I have nothing against the Order or most of its members. I reserve that for your leader. The one glaring exception to that being Arthur and Molly. Three members of your family owe me a life debt and only Bill is honoring it. Because your one non-idiot child is my closest friend now, I will warn you to stay away from me. You have wronged me in a way that makes me question your fitness as parents and generally as human beings.

So, how have you been Albus? You might want to imagine how angry I am with you right now. You’ve kept me in the dark about so much that I doubt I can trust anything you say now. You’ve used my money to fund your projects without even bothering to ask me. Picture my surprise when I find out who is really funding the Order and Phoenix Expeditions. Not a pretty sight is it?

If I get out of this alive, no thanks to you, we will have a reckoning. I will have questions and you will give me answers. If I don’t like what you are saying, I’ll get help from someone else! I won’t delude myself into thinking I can beat him alone, but that doesn’t mean we have to

be best mates. Just remember that I won't be buying the kind old Grandfather act anymore.

Maybe it's time you stop waiting for a teenager to fight your battles for you? Hell up until last year, I'd have done damn near anything for you. How do you pay me back? By turning my friends against me? You're so smooth it probably didn't hit them until I escaped. You certainly haven't trained me worth a damn. I've been on a month and a half crash course on what life is like in the real world and I can say how poorly Hogwarts has prepared me for what I've been experiencing as of late. I hope you have managed to get a decent teacher for your students this year.

So let's summarize for a moment shall we? You've kept me penned up with the Dursley's for my own good. You haven't really lifted a finger to help me prepare for the fight I am destined for. You managed to get my friends and some of the few adults I thought I could trust to betray me. Exactly how was the constant Obliviations and love potions supposed to help me anyway? Did you sleep at night confident that I was blissfully enjoying some kind of lie, that happy childhood that never existed?

When I come back, you are going to give me assurances. If you try and cross me again, you might get a taste of the power the Dark Lord knows not.

I'm not sure whether you are my enemy, but I know one thing for damn sure. You are not my friend.

HJP

You hand it back to Bill, who looks it over. "That's subtle Harry. You are as smooth as a bludgeoning curse. A little harsh towards Mum and Dad, but I don't plan on letting them forget about it anytime soon either. I only wish I could see the look on their face when Fleur gave them the business. She's already said that she's not going to let Mum help with the wedding at all. That should go over real well. Hopefully, she saves it for the pensieve."

The two of you laugh at the imagery before he continues, “You might not want to back Dumbledore into so much of a corner. See how he responds before pushing him further. He might have justified what was done to you as ‘the greater good’, but if you push him more, he might resort to doing things simply because he has no other options.”

“He hasn’t exactly given me lots of options either, but you’ve got a point. I’m going to try and get some rest. Kwan said the dreams weren’t so bad this time.”

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You were half expecting the dreams to be worse than ever. Kwan brings out your paranoid side quite well doesn’t he? At least in this case he wasn’t yanking your wand. You actually manage a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. It’s a nice change of pace.

Unfortunately, a nice lie in doesn’t improve the stark and dreary lobby. It doesn’t do anything about the horde of Inferi surrounding the bank. On the other hand, it is a bit better than waking up in a cold sweat and wanting to scream. You should be more appreciative of the simpler things in life.

Kwan’s catching up on his sleep. Collins must be upstairs. Bill and Thundercloud are eating some sandwiches. The American Indian gestures to one as you walk up.

“Have a sandwich, Harry. Apparently, you should have stocked more peanut butter and jelly and less bologna.” In hindsight, selecting a luncheon meat that no one in the party really knows what animal it comes from was not your best idea. The biggest problem with the ‘mystery meat’ is that it has the same general complexion as the Inferi. Peanut butter is a much safer choice – and it has chunky nuts too!

“I finally got some decent sleep. I wonder why things have gotten better, any ideas?”

Thundercloud sets his lunch down and takes a drink from his cup. “It’s tough to say. Perhaps the serenity wards the two of you have set

up are finally overcoming the innate evil of this city? Maybe the disposal of much of the horde outside is starting to have a positive effect on the city. It is difficult to say. For the moment I say we enjoy the brief respite we have been afforded.”

Bill smiles and taps his cup to Thundercloud’s. “I’ll drink to that. Harry, we’ve got three ‘Fun with Severing Charms’ and one ‘Purple Armageddon’ ready. Once Kwan gets up, we’ll put Collins to bed and get some sleep ourselves. Why don’t you go pickup another load of Dragon bone and check out the Magical School. After that prepare three more charging runes and I think we’ll be able to have some good old fashioned Inferi blasting.”

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After three passes over the Ziggurat style school, you still only spot a few windows and no movement. Not exactly the most scenic place to learn. Still the building looks like it is fairly intact. You can bring Bill by here soon and see if he believes that it is a better choice for the next building to investigate.

It still looks ominous in the perpetual twilight permeating the cave. You drift over the eerie wreckage of other buildings towards the Ministry building. The bleak scene looks like one of those disaster movies Dudders was always watching. Crumbled stonework and rotted beams of timber are silent reminders of the horror that took place here.

The one winged, headless dragon corpse isn’t very frightening anymore. It’s just a chore now. You start work on one of the legs. Hack needs a new club after all. You’ll need to look into enchanting objects. You should make yourself some nice things.

Every now and then, you have to stop what you are doing and get rid of an Inferi or two. They’ve been reduced to a nuisance now, haven’t they? Still, you can’t afford to be overconfident as you line up your shot and cast a Tonare. The blasting curse blows another one away. Too bad there are probably still a couple of thousand to go.



There's a group of three, no make that four approaching. One of them looks like it is carrying its own arm. How bloody disgusting is that! Wait a second. It just walked up behind one of the others and hit it with its detached arm. The other two turn towards the one wielding the limb. Bone collecting can wait. This warrants further investigation.

The Dragonfly responds to your commands. You've become more comfortable with it, but still would rather have your Firebolt. The one Inferius is dodging the other two and swinging its arm like a club.

After four days of watching 'Lifestyles of the Eternally Damned', you are certain of one thing – Inferi do not dodge. They just walk right into it. Whatever this is, it isn't one of them. Of course you should probably give it a hand, oh that's a bad pun, otherwise you might not find out what it is.

"Lacero! Reducto!" Your spells take care of one and its crude club crushes the other. On closer inspection, it appears to be a statue of a man. He, might as well give it a sex, wears what looks like a carved breastplate and helmet – like some kind of soldier from the middle ages.

It's saying something in Portuguese. Wait now it sounds more like Spanish. You've met talking paintings, so why not a talking statue.

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes. That was my next choice. How did you manage to get into the city?"

"No at liberty to say. I would have come over sooner, but I thought you were one of them."

"Would you be so kind, young Wizard to levitate myself back up to the Ministry building? We can talk more there in relative safety. I am not as indestructible as I once was and the Inferi are capable of damaging me."

You comply and bring him to the terrace where you destroyed the Inferi yesterday. The office inside was once very luxurious, but it had long since been ransacked.

You set the heavy statue down, but stay floating above him. It's nice to have someone else to talk to, but you're not exactly willing to get within arms reach of the construct. He looks at the remains of the Inferius on the terrace and shakes his head almost sadly. "The former Minister, he too failed to recognize the danger until it was upon him."

Your curiosity gets the best of you. "Who are you?"

It bows as well as a one armed statue can. "I am the living echo of Hernando de Soto known to the world as a Conquistador."

You haven't had any history classes that didn't fixate on Goblin revolutions since you were ten. De Soto doesn't ring any bells. Balboa and Cortez do, but you're not exactly talking to them are you, "Who?"

"Has my legend already faded? That is so very sad."

"Sorry, history isn't my specialty. I'm sure there are plenty of people who know who you are. So what exactly is a statue of a Spanish Conquistador doing in a hidden city in Brazil?"

"It is a long story, but you will find it useful nonetheless. If I could trouble first, would you to reattach my arm? It would remove a great burden."

You cast a quick reparo and the arm reattaches itself to the statue. It responds by flexing its fingers and making a fist. "Gracias, that is much better. The history books do not do my escapades justice. Initially, I was lured here like so many others for the promise of gold. I befriended Atahualpa, the Priest King of the Incas. It was through his friendship that I discovered their magical society of this land. Their magic was mostly based in Runes and Rituals. Though he ransomed himself with a room of gold and two of silver, Pizarro planned to execute him. I was able to help him fake his death and escape to here."

“But, weren’t you trying to conquer them?”

“The foolish young man I was, had long since grown up. I had watched a man who could not even write his own name slaughter thousands. All because he had a dozen of us trained wizards at his command and a friar whispering the words of the Church in his ear. My countrymen’s actions sickened me. I took my blood money and returned to Spain. When I returned to the New World, I brought European magic and wands with me. I led a disastrous expedition hoping that a few more ill-fated adventures would turn Spain’s eyes away from here. Supposedly, I was buried in the Mississippi River, but I returned here to help teach European magic to these people.”

He paused gesturing with open arms encompassing the cavern and the ruins before continuing. “When my time on this world neared its end, I commissioned a statue instead of creating a painting. I was created by the renowned Bernini. Do you not like? Ah, I see the name has no meaning to you. No Art, no History – at least you obviously know your spells?”

Speaking of obvious things, Hernando de Soto was clearly a man that liked the sound of his own voice. “I probably wouldn’t be here otherwise. How about we skip to something a little more current?”

“For over four hundred years I have given advice and counsel to the leaders of this city. I helped to found our Academy de Magia. Until my death, I served as a teacher, a scholar, and I occasionally dabbled in politics. After my death, my statue continued to serve as an advisor to leaders and occasionally as a teacher.”

“How did Riddle destroy this city?”

“Ah, so you know one of the two villains. I figured most would blame Chilotha.”

You have never heard the name before. “Who is Chilotha?”

“He was a vile Wizard - Grindelwald’s supporter in this part of the world and before him Xerus. He ascended to High Priest of the Cult

of the Winged Serpent. His power and influence sheltered him from the ICW. He dreamed of a return to the ancient days of ritual blood sacrifices and cabals of near immortal priest kings ruling over all. With the Englishman's help, the Cult grew into a danger unimaginable."

"Nearly immortal? What do you know of that?"

The statue beckoned you closer as his deep baritone drops to a near whisper, "Why do you want to know? Would you follow their dark path?"

You weigh your answer carefully. "No. I'm trying to stop that bastard Riddle. He has a Horcrux hidden here. I mean to find it and destroy it."

"Bah! You are a mere boy. The Englishman was extraordinarily powerful decades ago. What hope do you have against him?"

"I've fought him in one way or another five times. I am his equal, whether I want to be or not."

The statue of De Soto laughs at you. "You certainly have a swagger to you, I'll give you that. For your sake, I hope you can back up your bold and thunderous statements. However, you have a more pressing problem?"

"What is that?"

"Not what, 'who'. That 'who' is Chilotha. Your Englishman isn't the only one with a Horcrux here. Betrayed by your countryman, Chilotha's disembodied spirit haunts this city bound by the magic that helps hide this place. He will come for you. He is a master of possession and he wants revenge on Riddle for the betrayal of the pact they made."

"What? Chilotha is still here?"

“Yes. I haven’t spoken to the thing in a decade, but I know his foul presence still lingers, though his sanity, if he ever was sane, is now even more in doubt.”

The other important fact recently imparted hits you like the Hogwarts Express. “Did you just say Possession?”

“Si. He will come for you in your dreams and take control of you.”

“Everyone has been having bad dreams, but they stopped today. So we’re fine right?”

“Oh no, I am afraid not my young friend. Chilotha wouldn’t stop trying to pick at your defenses unless he already has one of you under his thumb. You are in grave danger. He will cement his grasp on his pawn and then most likely kill you all. Have you noticed a change in one of your friends?”

You take a deep calming breath. Panic is not very productive. “Shit! It must be Collins. He’s been acting strange for the last couple of days, last I saw him he seemed normal enough. I’ve got to get back there and warn them!”

“Wait! You must know what to look for! Chilotha’s remaining Horcrux is a rod topped with the visage of a Couatl. He will have it near him to help him fully control your friend. You need to destroy it first.”

“How do I do that?”

“Can you cast the Avada Kedarva? It should remove the soul fragment from the item.”

“Yes, though not very well.”

The statue arched a marble eyebrow at you. “Then senor, for your sake, I suggest you get better at it quickly.”

You start to leave, but he shouts at you again, “Stop! Before you go you must learn something. There is a dead man down the hall locked in the bathroom. He has something to tell you.”

“What?” You have no time for this.

“The Inferius is Chilotha. He has a series of runes inscribed on his deformed bodies. They are written in Toltec. Up on the roof, I have a tome of Toltec Runes and Rituals. The runes will tell you the secret of this place. Do you understand what I am implying?”

“I don’t have time for this! I’ve got to get back there.”

“Then you will die a fool rushing into a situation you are not prepared for. Chilotha was almost three hundred years old. Is he remarkably powerful? I’ve seen only a few more powerful than him, but he survived mainly by guile. You’ll need every edge you can get. He won’t be expecting you to be able to Apparate. If you know the secret, you will be able to as well. It may already be too late for your friends.”

The statue did not know how close that comment hit home. Odd time to be thinking about Sirius, isn’t it? Last time you rushed in and someone paid the price. This time, what do you do? Chilotha would be able to Apparate. You’d be at a disadvantage. If you know the secret, you would have an edge he won’t expect. He also doesn’t know you’ve met De Soto, and he hasn’t made his move yet.”

You make your decision and hope it’s the right one. Landing next to De Soto, you mutter, “Fine! Where’s the fucking dead guy? We need to hurry.”

“The bathroom is down the hall – the third door on the left. It is the one that is blocked by the furniture. Now that I have both my arms again, I can restrain him, while you copy the runes you need.”

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When the biographers write about the hopefully long and happy life of Harry James Potter, you hope they are able to skip the part about you and the statue of Hernando de Soto, in a bathroom wrestling with a frail, but surprisingly strong dead thing that looked as much snake as it did man. It has all the makings of some outrageous joke. The purpose of this ridiculous task is that you could copy ancient runes

from its withered, decayed and naked flesh. It's not shaping up to be one of your finest moments. You can't even imagine what Rita would write about this!

You bind it with ropes as the statue puts its foot down on the creature's chest. You craft a quick lighting ward that allows you to see better. The bathroom is in surprisingly good shape, carved marble sinks, decorative inlays on the stall doors, bronze or copper fixtures, a long mirror covering half wall and of course, a thrashing dead thing in the middle of the floor.

"Where are the Runes?"

"They are on both arms and the back."

"So we don't need the legs, right?"

"No, we do not."

"Lacero! Lacero! There that's better. Now pin its arms down on the ground. There that's it. I'll start on his left arm."

"If I may be so bold, Toltec is one of the few runic languages that one reads from right to left."

"Thanks. I guess I'll start with the right arm then. Let's flip him onto his stomach now," staring at his arse is only marginally preferable to the sight in front of you. "Give me a minute, I want to put a temporary alarm on the doorway. I'd hate for some of his dead buddies to wander up here."

"So, what is your name Englishman?" Again, not really a situation you had ever imagined, idle chat with a statue holding down half a naked Inferius in an elegant bathroom once used by the Ministers of Brazil. If you weren't so pressed for time, you'd probably get a good laugh.

You answer as you set up a simplistic flashing light alarm. "Harry Potter."

"It is nice to meet you, Harry Potter. Though I wish it were under better circumstances."

"You and me both, you and me both. So you know how to read Toltec right?"

"Si, but I have found I cannot read this sentence aloud because of the magic bound to this place."

"Say I wrote one rune at a time on different sheets of parchment."

"I do not know if that would work; we can try."

It takes fifteen minutes more to get the pieces of parchment arranged to form the sentence. "I still cannot say it. The magic must be preventing me from saying it. Do you have any other ideas?"

For a moment you toy with the idea of trying Legilimency on a statue, but that doesn't sound possible, plus you've only ever done accidental Legilimency. You'd probably end up with rocks for brains. "No, I guess I need to get the book upstairs. Hold his hands up and let me bind them. We'll go back to the Minister's office and I will levitate you to the roof."

You stand and stretch your muscles and walk away from the dead thing thrashing about on the floor.

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In the corner of the roof, under a tarp, Hernando shows you his stash. He's got all kinds of things that he has salvaged from the city up here. When asked about the tarp, he mentioned that until recently, there were flying Inferi and they were attracted to shiny things and movement. "Early on, I managed to use my knowledge of the city to elude the Inferi. My preservation charm failed about ten years ago. Now, I am as vulnerable as any other piece of stonework."

He pulls aside a pensieve and sifts through a wooden crate containing a cracked foe glasses, a handful of wands and numerous



books. He pulls one book out of the pile and hands it to you - Toltec to Spanish. It's never easy is it?

"Start translating and I will go back downstairs and find one of the English to Spanish dictionaries."

Forty-five minutes later, the third time is the charm. It helps that Hernando is able to find the right pages in the book for you, but not able to say the runes aloud.

The Enchanted City is located in Pico da Nablina.

Satisfyingly, the slips of parchment burst into flames. You know a secret. You know a secret. "Hernando, now that I have read it we should be able to say it since no one else can hear us. Where are we?"

"We are in the Enchanted City inside the mountain of Pico da Nablina." Oddly, this location is further North from the areas you had been searching.

"I need to go. If I am lucky, he hasn't made his move and I can get the drop on him. Do you have any last minute advice on fighting Chilotha? Is there any way I can get him out and save Collins?" You're grasping at straws, but you have to ask.

"Do not believe what he offers. He may try and play. He is a silver tongued devil. There is a chance that destroying the Horcrux will allow your friend the opportunity to expel him, but if your friend cannot evict the possessing spirit, there is nothing you can do for him." That is not really comforting; knowing what Dumbledore probably would have had to do if you hadn't kicked the fucker out of you.

You feel around in his pile of wands for a spare that gives you any response. Only two out of the seven do anything, but a spare wand is a necessity. You borrow the one that feels the best. De Soto tries to reassure you, "Your friend, he is already gone. I am sorry. When you see him next, look upon him as the enemy that he truly is and not the man you once knew. Do not be deceived, if he is still hiding his true

nature; warn your friends and incapacitate him. Then you must find his unholy relic and destroy it.”

“Do you want me to make you a Portkey out of here?” You take a hunk of rope and make one back here, since the rest will need to duplicate your escapades in the restroom. It’s a shame that amongst the pile of equipment Hernando has amassed there are no Wizarding cameras, but there is that pensieve!

“I do not think one would work for only me. I will pack my belongings and start making my way towards the exit. With most of them surrounding the bank, I should be able to make it to the exit with little trouble. Should you fail, I must warn the people of this land that Chilotha has risen again. If you vanquish Chilotha, fly to the top of the cavern and light your wand. I will head towards your signal or back here. Then, I will tell you what little I know of where Riddle has placed his Horcrux. Vaya Con Dios, Harry Potter.”

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You grab the few Dragon bones you had managed to harvest before meeting Hernando. If nothing else they can serve as something to banish at Chilotha.

Your nerves are acting up on the broom ride back over the desolate landscape. How do you tell Kwan his partner has been taken over by one of the two Wizards responsible for the destruction of this place? How do you go back and attack someone that you have cooked for, dined with and fought alongside?

With no life-changing revelations forthcoming other than because you have no other choice, you bring the Dragonfly in for a landing on the second floor balcony. Walking into the empty office you feel a slight tingle. You just tripped a ward!

Jumping back you mount your broom and turn your glasses on. You recognize the basic scheme of an intruder alert ward. It doesn’t link to any other runes. Hopefully, Bill set it, but being raised to expect the worst, you don’t get your hopes up.

Trying to look as natural as possible, you land again and float the Dragon bone in front of you. You keep your glasses on and proceed cautiously.

There on the landing, it's a second ward. You don't recognize the pattern, but if you had to guess it is some kind of stunning or incapacitation. You walk back up and head across the building towards the other set of stairs. Meanwhile, you do a quick inventory of anything else you have. You have one fletcher's ward and one flaming spears of doom. You'd need the opportunity to point them at Chilotha and he's not likely to provide you the time. Too bad wards aren't mobile.

Then again, snakes are mobile and they can open their jaws rather wide, can't they? The fact you can order them around helps too, doesn't it?

You conjure two snakes and give them their orders and wedge the rune stones into their mouths. They slither into the pile of bones to conceal their presence, as you levitate the bone pile.

No wards on this landing. Nice to know the bad guy doesn't have every angle covered. You start walking down the steps and see that someone has been busy.

The teller's counter is gone. All of the team's equipment is pushed up against the wall. In the far corner there is a cage with four dogs in it. They are jumping up and down wildly and barking, but making no sounds – obviously silenced.

Over towards the entrance to the vaults, you see that steps and a platform topped with a throne have been created. You suppose that is what happened to the long counter. The Bulk Transfer platform is destroyed, but where are the Goblins? The answer is on the other side of the lobby, pinned to the wall. The scene is much like the one in the vaults below.

Collins is sitting on the throne. "Greetings, Harry Potter." His voice sounds different. He is wearing a decorative robe and has some kind of headdress on.

“Jake, what the hell is going on? What are you doing?” You decide to play it cool and not give anything away setting the bone pile against the wall and knowing that the snakes will keep their mouths pointed at the ‘yellow haired man’. You keep your wand in your hand, but don’t directly point it at him.

He rises and you see the serpent tipped rod in some kind of holder next to his throne. “I have had to borrow your friend’s body for the moment. Allow me to introduce myself properly, I am Chilotha, once the Priest King of this city. I need your help.”

“You have a funny way of asking.” You gesture to the dead Goblins and the kennelled dogs which must be the rest of the party.

“You’re a powerful, but young wizard. This body’s memories tell me that. Your friends will guarantee your cooperation. The Goblins, well, I was doing you a favor. They were going to betray you, as soon as you located the treasures, despicable loathsome creatures. The irony is that they couldn’t get the platform working.” The wizard had a raspy laugh that sounded bizarre coming from Collins’ body.

“Why me? Bill’s a much better Curse Breaker. Kwan’s better in a fight. Thundercloud has more experience to draw from.”

“All true, but we have a common enemy Harry Potter. When he first arrived here, he called himself Tom Riddle. When he left, he shed that skin and called himself Lord Voldemort. He came here claiming to be a seeker of knowledge, and many fell prey to his charm. When he had partaken of all this city had to offer, he and his followers became the destroyers. I tried to stop him, but he bested me. You see the results outside.”

Even in this situation some sarcasm bubbles to the surface, “So you’re the spirit of a powerful wizard and you want to strike back against Riddle. He has quite a few enemies; some of them have even formed a club.”

He ignores you, much like a boorish and pompous Dark Wizard would. “You told the others that you came for gold and glory, but I

know different. You know about his Horcrux here and you seek to destroy it. I would have my revenge on Riddle as well for destroying the city I loved. We can destroy the seer glass together.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. What do you want from me?”  
That’s it, keep him talking and milk what information you can from him.

“You are too powerful for me to unwillingly possess. Willingly is another matter. With your power and my knowledge, we will bring vengeance to the pathetic worm who calls himself Voldemort. Join with me and we won’t need your friends. I know how to banish the Daemon that Riddle summoned as the guardian of his Horcrux. I know how to beat the wards that surround the place he has it stored. Your friend is a mere neophyte compared to my knowledge of warding.”

Did he just say Daemon? “There’s a Daemon here?”

“Oh yes, and it is not one of the ‘summon and allow to roam free’ type of Daemons, like the one Grindlewald unleashed – the one that required Albus Dumbledore, Nicolas Flammel and Odysseus Bones to destroy. This one is a far more powerful one shackled inside layers of binding circles. If freed, it would ravage the land for hundreds of miles and take dozens of wizards to vanquish.”

Holy shit! Never mind that, right now! Stick to the Dark Lord wannabe in front of you, “Say we destroy Riddle, then what?”

“Oh there are a few ancient Mayan rituals I know, that can possibly return me to my flesh. Our union would not be permanent. I merely wish to vanquish him and return here to rebuild this ancient and noble city. You have a thirst to learn and I am a willing teacher...”

Does he seriously expect you to believe that crap? He is just another in a long line of people wanting to use you. It’s time to end this charade now isn’t it? “That ritual wouldn’t happen to involve ‘Bones of the Father, Flesh of the Servant and Blood of the Enemy’, would it?”

His eyes narrow, “Among other things, yes.”

“You weren’t his enemy, you were his partner. You’re only mad because he betrayed you first. You know the warding protecting his treasure because you did it. If I had come down the other stairs and hit that ward, we wouldn’t be having this conversation would be. I’d already be on an altar or something wouldn’t I?”

“Ah more perceptive than Collins gave you credit for, perhaps you require more coercion – Avada Kedarva!” You instinctively dodge, but the green jet of lethal energy streaks towards the cage and strikes one of the barking dogs. It collapses. “Pity, I don’t remember which one that was. Save your remaining friends boy. Your raw power will never beat me.”

You’re pretty sure you can cast that killing curse now. You trigger your concealed wards and will the snakes to attack. Concentrating on the other side you Apparate, “Avada Kedarva!” Your bellowed cry sends a bolt of power directly into the rod. It explodes in a shuddering blast and a blinding flash of energy.

Chilotha screams as you Apparate into the cage collapsing in a heap amongst the dogs. You try to shake off the wave of nausea passing through you and pull the rope out of your pocket. “Portkey! Everyone bite the rope. Activate!”

The pull of the Portkey yanks the four of you away back to the roof of the Ministry building. You’re still shaking from casting the killing curse.

With a trembling voice you say, “There are wands in a crate under the tarp. I thought I saw a few brooms in there too. Let me see if I can dispel this transfiguration. Finite Incantatem!” The first dog collapses to the ground and grows expanding to troll size. The next one turns into Kwan who scrambles towards the tarp.

You swallow the growing lump in your throat and make one final wave of your wand. Seconds later you are staring into the sad eyes of Lone Thundercloud. He opens his mouth to say something, but you are blinded and deafened by rage.

You scream in fury and grab the Portkey! Shock and raw hatred course through your veins. Thundercloud lunges to stop you, but he is too slow. "Not Bill! Not Bill! Not Bill! Activate!"

Reappearing in the cage you immediately Apparate out of it as a curse you couldn't even identify slams into the bars. You reappear by the bone pile and near the two scorch marks where your snakes once were and magically hurl the entire pile at him.

Chilotha's venom laden voice mocks you as your barrage of spells are knocked aside like twigs, "You insignificant maggot, do you know what you have done? In the few moments you have left, consider what words you want on your tombstone." He's limping slightly; one of your wards must have drawn some blood. You're planning on drawing more - a lot more.

Fleur's tear streaked face flashes before your imagination. The anguished and accusing looks on the Weasley's faces join hers in condemning you. Your best friend is dead and this motherfucker is going to pay!

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Author's notes – Well there you go, the pace is picking up and things are certainly getting harder. The horde of Inferi seems like such an annoyance right about now compared to a would-be Dark Lord and a Daemon waiting in the wings. Join me on DLP and FFA for discussion of this story. I chose De Soto over Pizarro because he seemed more interesting. Vaya Con Dios until next time...

Disclaimer – You are Harry Potter. It's probably best that you don't own yourself and someone named JKR. Maybe it will make what you are about to do easier? Show no mercy!

Acknowledgements – The Alpha Fight Club crew (naturally) and FairyQilan's beta. I'd also like to thank the horde of reviewers from the last chapter that forced me to alter my update schedule. You can put your pitchforks away...please?

Chapter 21 – I'll Write on Your Tombstone, "I Thank You for Dinner"

September 6th, 1996

"Tonare! Pello Hostis!" Pure righteous anger fuels the strength of your spells. Chilotha's shield barely holds the blasting curse and the banisher breaks through tossing him across the room like a rag doll.

You wait for the sickening crunch that never comes as Collins' possessed body apparates just shy of the wall. Damnation! Move! Where is he? Seconds pass as you furiously scan the room. There! He's back up on his blasted platform.

Chilotha cackles, "Such power you have boy. Your death will make a magnificent Horcrux, replacing the one you destroyed." He runs his wand along the length of his left arm drawing his own blood. A tiny stream of blood follows his wand and he hurls it at the ground. The blood turns into a meter wide column of flame that starts moving towards you.

"Never seen Bloodfire before boy? It will be the last thing you ever see."

"Vertexcis!" Let's see how blood magic stands up to elemental magic. The vortex of wind causes the living column of fire to flare and then dim, but not completely fade. It continues moving forward! You take a hint from the bastard and Apparate as both the Bloodfire and a nasty severing charm race towards you.

Reappearing on the other side of the lobby, you go for something lethal and thrust your wand at Chilotha, "Acidus Lampas!" A spray of



acid erupts from your wand tip. He crystallizes it with a dismissive wave, as the Bloodfire changes directions and starts for you again.

You want this fucker dead! He killed Bill! “Arresta Contego!” An almost solid barrier of dueling magic surrounds your wand and you smack his next two curses away like a beater. It’s time to fight smarter. You leap to your left putting the Bloodfire between you and Chilotha.

“Attero Glaicius!” Shards of ice fly through the column further weakening it but continuing on to their real target. An angry cry tells you that your ruse worked.

You barely duck the blasting curse that he replies with, as the two of you Apparate.

He spots you first and some kind of wounding curse grazes your arm drawing blood and sends a sensation like an electrical shock through your body. The Bloodfire begins moving faster. “The more you bleed the faster it moves. I’m through toying with you. It’s time you die!” Chilotha summons a second column of Bloodfire. “Do you like it? I can do more! They will hunt you down.” Sidestepping your blasting curses, he conjures two more of the Bloodfire drawing blood from each limb.

There’s probably some ridiculously easy way to deal with these things. The problem is that you don’t know it. You Apparate to force all four columns to change direction and try to time your strike – now!

“Vertexcis!” The wind fans the Bloodfire directly in front of your enemy. It momentarily strengthens and sends the flames back into the retreating Wizard. A blood curdling scream is your reward for a well played tactic.

Still a bit of pain doesn’t really help you with the four fire elementals stalking you. You send a geyser of water into the original one, diminishing it to about half of its original strength.

The blood magic must be difficult to maintain as his spells are more simplistic now. It’s too bad that simple spells can be just as lethal. A

well-placed disarming curse knocks you backwards and tosses your wand into the air. He summons it to his hand and laughs at you while halting the columns of fire.

“A suitable trophy, perhaps I should use it to create a new Horcrux. There is no hope for you now little Animagus! I’ll finish your friends and then deal with the Daemon.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Keep him talking. They always like to talk. When you move, you need to be faster than you have ever been before!

“Oh I helped summon it, little fool. When Riddle destroyed my other Horcrux as the sacrifice needed to summon it, the act linked my life force to the binding rings. Even had you succeeded in killing me, the circles would fade and the Daemon would be free. It sees things. It knows things. Some of them come to pass others do not, but it lies to me as much as it tells the truth. It is how I knew you would come. It wants to be free, to destroy, but it also must guard Riddle’s Horcrux. After the last group stumbled on the city, the creature created some kind of barrier. Nothing living can leave. Even I cannot leave without getting rid of it. The secret is virtually useless until the Daemon’s barrier is gone.”

Chilotha stops for a moment almost lost in thought. “That’s right! You must know the Secret! So, you read the runes from my corpse. Let us close that loophole. I always expected Riddle to betray me, so I took precautions. My error was thinking that he wished to replace me as the leader of the cult. Instead, he killed my followers first. There was no one left to perform the ritual to return me to life.”

He laughs clearly not noticing his lack of sanity. “Even if I fail to banish the Daemon, it will be free. When Riddle comes back here, it will kill him and he will be trapped as I was – for eternity! It is perfect! No matter what happens, I triumph!” An intricate wave of his wand and his Inferius corpse appears in the room. He looks at it in contempt and disgust before having the nearest Bloodfire consume it leaving only scorched stone in its wake.

Tilting his head, he watches his corpse char in the flame. You use the distraction and make your move. Apparently, he assumes you don't have a spare wand – his mistake. You pull it out and put everything you have into a Lacero. The poorly matched wand weakens the spell, but it still manages to almost sever the arm he shields himself with at the last second. Your wand in that hand clatters to the ground. You try to summon it, but he steps on it.

The original column of Bloodfire disappears. Well that's one way to get rid of the stuff! The heat sizzles as one of the other columns gets too close and your wand arm burns before you can Apparate.

Reappearing on the platform you hastily apply a numbing charm that doesn't do much to stem the pain. Chilotha whips his wand and fully removes the dangling arm from his body. Seconds later, a silvery arm begins growing in its place. Is there a fucking trick Riddle didn't steal from this guy? You try and summon your holly wand again, but he must have somehow stuck it to the floor, while you were treating the burn.

Choosing simpler spells to counteract the less than capable wand, you throw a reductor at him. His new arm absorbs it and remains undamaged. The only thing it does is give you enough time to send more water into a closing column of fire.

The unnerving thing about him is that most of his spells are silent and completely foreign to you. This is the first time you've really heard him chant a spell. "For the one who has wronged me, for the one who has wronged me - Persecutus Manus!" The hand flies through the air faster than it could have been banished and it's flexing its fingers. Maybe it's better if he sticks to silent spells! You banish the Hand, but it immediately flies back towards you. You Apparate away from it and the two remaining Bloodfires. He's chanting something. What is it this time? Oh shit! He's chanting an Anti-Apparition ward.

You need solutions - fast. It dodges your blasting curse and slams into you; knocking you to the ground like one of Dudley's meaty paws. You block its next attack with your non-wand arm, but it leaps up and grabs you by your throat, clenching and choking as you struggle to remove it. It won't let go!

Gurgling, you desperately try to pry it off, as the pillars of fire close on your position. Wordless magic is one thing, but try wordless magic when you're getting strangled. You try and think of anything you might know about Blood Magic. He's still controlling the arm maybe he'll feel this. You reach down to your belt and yank your bone carving chisel and stab the arm. Yeah! He felt that! The impaled hand lets go briefly and you hurl it into the approaching Bloodfire.

The hand thrashes momentarily and stills as the Bloodfire around it reduces the appendage to ashes. The good news is you interrupted his concentration enough that he is back down to one weak looking Bloodfire. Maybe, he's wearing down as fast as you are. All this apparation is really taking a toll on you.

A cutter digs a gash into your leg and you fall to the ground. The flesh around the wound blackens instantly. No, he's definitely not weakening as fast as you hoped. You dissipate the final Bloodfire, but a bludgeoner knocks you back into the wall. The two of you trade curses from long range. If you only had your regular wand!

You half-close the bleeding leg wound and stagger to your feet. The injury forces you to hop in an almost comical manner. Like a pair of punch drunk boxers, the two of you trade curses as you close the distance. This nearly useless wand is taking all the power out of your spells. Your weak shield buckles under the onslaught of blasting and crushing curses, but still you keep fighting. Chilotha Apparates to your left and blasts you off your feet and spinning into the wall. You hear the crack of bone and see your foot pointed in the wrong direction. Somehow you held onto your wand and shield the next spell, reflecting it back at him. He's got the momentum and he knows it. You need a distraction in a bad way, but doubt any is coming soon.

The distraction you hoped for comes in the form of a scream and a troll's body stumbling down the steps. Hack must have hit that ward! You hit Chilotha with a piercing curse drawing blood from one side of his chest. Hopefully, it collapsed a lung.

If you had a minute, you would wonder how Hack got back here, but instead you press the advantage using bludgeoners to hammer away

at him. Neither of you are in good shape right now. Hack is on his hands and knees struggling to rise. Hurray for having friends!

He must sense that he's outnumbered as he throws a killing curse at Hack. You hurl another weak bludgeoner at him and turn your head hoping not to see another friend die. The curse explodes on impact with a floating cot.

Kwan gracefully leaps over Hacks bulky form and sends a bone crusher into Chilotha's shield. Knowing you're in no shape to help him, you begin your own Anti-Apparition and Portkey chant. It's one of the few magical things Jake Collins had taught you. You hope that, in whatever place he is in now, he appreciates the irony. It's very draining for one wizard to do alone, but you have the power and the will. Kwan sees what you are doing and nods moving forward and shielding curses from his former partner. You keep moving your wand and repeating the chant as Kwan and Chilotha trade blows.

Hack rises with a murderous look on his face and charges forward blocking a curse with his wooden shield and swinging his club making Chilotha retreat backwards. He dodges the first strike, but the backstroke catches him spinning him to the ground.

You can see the Dark Wizard fading fast. Had the two of you kept fighting, it's anyone's guess who would have survived. Kwan and Hack are fresh, powerful and angry. Chilotha is doomed. It's only a matter of time.

Kwan's wand moves in a precise circle and then twists sending a massive bludgeoner through Chilotha's shields. He follows it with a severing charm and some kind of incendiary curse that he definitely has never shown you before.

Burnt, disarmed, bleeding, and now missing most of a leg Chilotha is on the ground in front of the two. Kwan gestures to Hack and the troll's club halts before delivering the kill strike. Chilotha's hand is held up and he looks as if he is pleading for his life. You want to scream at Kwan, but you don't dare stop your chant.

Straining your ears you barely make out Kwan's last words to Chilotha. "Nice try, but Collins' Korean not that good." A severing charm decapitates the would-be Dark Lord as you collapse along the wall.

You feel like you are going to pass out, but you maintain consciousness. Kwan sits down beside you and starts dressing your wounds. "Words do not express how stupid you are! Thought you were done being stupid. Did mother nurse you with the good luck potion? No one survives being that stupid without help!"

"He killed Bill. I wasn't thinking."

"Would Bill want you to run headlong against a madman when you have two other wizards and a troll to fight with you? Idiot!" To emphasize his point, he whacks your head with his palm. "Better yet ask him yourself."

You're still dazed from the quick slap to your noggin to process what he is pointing at. There on an antique broom sits Bill Weasley. You damn near faint for the second time.

"How? What? Who?" Your eyes cloud over with tears only adding to the confusion.

Bill holds up a circlet of gold. What the hell is that? His voice is quiet and he tries to calm you down. You're losing it. "But I saw..."

"The Mayan armband Harry, I asked Thundercloud to show me what it was like to be an Animagus. We were working with it when Collins attacked us. It took me a second to remember I had it on. That's what I was trying to tell you on the roof."

You're speechless. The mouth moves, but no words will form. Your best friend is alive! But that means, "Thundercloud?"

Kwan answers, "Leapt into the path of a killing curse that was coming for me."

You don't know what to say or feel. Part of you feels ashamed that you are happy Bill is alive. Is that wrong? Everything feels wrong! You feel numb, sick, and guilty. Distantly, you hear Bill say, "Hack, get a blanket. I think Harry is going into shock."

You watch the troll ransack your cot and bring back a blanket as Bill sits next to you and starts working on more of your wounds. They keep talking to you, but you can't seem to respond at all. You're so tired. It feels like you've traded one friend for another.

"Who was winning?"

"Neither. Dark Wizard had stupid boy almost down, but he was beaten too."

"Damn Harry! I read up on the history of this region. If that guy was really Chilothe the Serpent Priest, you just took on South America's version of Voldemort! How did you know?"

You stare at his beaming face for a second or perhaps a minute, "De Soto told me."

"Who?"

"A statue. Trying to get to the exit. Fly up into the cavern and shoot sparks."

"What? You're not making much sense. Kwan have you got a pepper up potion? Thanks. Here Harry drink this. It will help clear your head." He forces the vial to your lips and you comply. It takes a minute to focus. "Take a minute and calm down. Focus for a minute. There you go, good man. Sorry I gave you a scare mate."

Bill looks at Kwan, "Would you look after our friend? I know he wouldn't want to end up as one of them." Kwan nods grimly and gets up heading for the wrecked cage. Fresh tears well up in your eyes. You don't want to watch but you owe it to the man, who taught you how to become an Animagus. He's another death to feel guilty about, another person you weren't quick enough to save. Watching Kwan

revert the American Indian back to his form and severing his head brings you back to reality. It's a damn shitty life sometimes.

In your mind the faces of Fleur and the Weasleys are replaced with Lauren's. The shock and horror on her face, 'But you told me it wasn't that dangerous out there!'

Some clarity begins to return to you. You try to answer Bill's questions. "De Soto told me; he's a statue. He helped me learn the secret of this place. He's trying to make it to the entrance and get out in case we didn't stop Chilotha. Someone needs to fly up into the cavern and light their wand. He'll head for the light or back to the Ministry building. Bring him back here. How'd you get Hack here anyway?"

"Ratty looking magic carpet, it looks like rubbish, but it still flies. Nice bit of goodies up on the roof. So, that's how you were able to Apparate and make a Portkey! Damn good work! A statue huh? We should go get him."

Mental clarity is returning and with that comes a horrific realization, "Bill, the Daemon! Chilotha said it would be free after he dies. He tied his life to the binding circles. When they're gone the Daemon will be free!"

Bill looks very alarmed. "We'll find the statue and see if this was a bluff. Otherwise, we could be in serious trouble."

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Roughly two hours later, you realize it wasn't a bluff. You're riding on that ratty nasty magic carpet; still in a good bit of pain. You can feel the tangible barrier preventing you from moving forward. Kwan's keeping a look out for any wandering Inferi, while you and De Soto investigate the barrier.

You suppose the upside to being a living statue is that technically, he isn't living. He passes through the barrier with ease. So it isn't a complete loss as you hand him the journals. You watch the statue head down the passageway about 20 paces to ensure it is beyond



the wards and set the journals down on a rock. They should synchronize themselves in about six hours. It'd be nice to hear from the outside world. You and De Soto will come back and get them. Bill is waiting on Kwan and they are going to inspect Chilotha's temple and see if they can get close enough to inspect the bindings on the Daemon.

"We should go now. Nothing left here." Kwan mutters ruefully and climbs back on to the carpet. He levitates De Soto along as the three of you head back to the bank.

"Well?" Bill's waiting anxiously for a report.

You sip another pain potion. "No good. Even though I know exactly where I am, I can't get past the barrier. What do we know about Daemons?"

"They're big, mean, and nasty. Most of them are highly resistant to magic and stronger than a giant. When they get close to you they start to sap your magic and weaken you further. That's about all I know? Anyone else have anything to offer?"

Hernando De Soto looks at the four of you. "Once I was able to get close enough to see it. The Daemon stands perhaps twenty feet tall. It has four clawed arms, legs of a goat, and horns of the ram. I think I saw a tail but the barrier is somewhat hazy and I was being harassed by the Inferi at the time. All the treasure is there in the temple. Chilotha and Riddle moved it all there for ease of access. For a few years a portrait in the temple was able to keep tabs on it for me, but one day the portrait ceased working. I do know that the spirit of Chilotha would often float outside the barrier and converse with the beast. Your Riddle returned three times before the painting stopped working. He taunted both Chilotha and the Daemon while removing most of the treasure. I have no idea if he has returned since."

Bill nods his thanks. "Come on Kwan, we should go."

"I want to go to."

“No Harry, you should sit this one out. You’re in no condition to go anywhere. If it wasn’t for the whole Secret Keeper thing, you wouldn’t have gone to the exit.”

“I’ll stay on my broom. Besides, you might need me.” Nice false bravado, you probably couldn’t take on Ginny Weasley’s pet puffskein right now, but you’re getting better at ‘talking tough’.

Bill reluctantly agrees and you clamber onto your broom and push off with your non-immobilized foot. You’ve got your holly wand back and surprisingly your new spare used to be Chlotho’s wand. It’s not quite as good a match as the holly, but it feels quite powerful. Secretly, you picture a scene of you telling Riddle where you got this wand right before you kill him. Hey, it’s your dream! Why not make it a good one? Bill orders Hack to stay in the lobby with De Soto.

You float over to your trunk and retrieve the Mossberg. “Hernando, are you familiar with shotguns?”

“No. The real Hernando occasionally used such weapons, but I am certain that there have been changes in the last four centuries.”

“When we get back, I’ll show you what little I know. We may need all the firepower we can get our hands on.”

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The Temple of the Winged Serpent looms in front of the three of you. Your curse breaker glasses show no hint of active wards other than preservation charms. A further investigation shows many that have been deactivated, probably recently by Chlotho. None of them are impressive, but then again this is just the outside of the Temple and no one is taking anything for granted.

“If nothing else, we can try and refocus them to attack the creature as it leaves the temple. They’ll probably just irritate it, but I’ll take whatever I can get.” Bill whispers.

The outside of the temple is in remarkably good condition, it looks like so many of the Aztec, Incan and Mayan ruins that decorate tourist

pamphlets throughout the region. The fact that it is so close to the larger school made it easy to overlook. Hell, you originally thought it was part of the school! Floating up the steps on the Dragonfly you look at the intricate carvings on the obsidian columns of serpents with great feathery wings.

Kwan levitates a struggling Inferius into the entrance, while the two of you verify that it doesn't activate any of the wards. Satisfied, the three of you continue with your borrowed shield ahead of you.

Once inside, you are able to appreciate what it must have looked like in its heyday. They were apparently a well funded group of bloodthirsty lunatics. The detail on the faded paintings is striking, most depicting ritual sacrifice. It's almost a relief that all of them are frozen in place now. You'd hate to see most of these things in motion.

Many of the statues are adorned with gold and silver inlays. You idly wonder if De Soto ever got jealous.

The three of you move carefully through the central passageway. Every few feet both you and Bill check for the still non-existent wards. At the end of the corridor, you see a pair of closed doors. From the cracks underneath, you can see the telltale signs of a potent magical energy.

Bill seems extra nervous at the doors. He checks them five times and conjures a small mirror to peer under the door. You can't blame him, you're scared too. Unless Chilotha was lying there is a no-shit conjured from the nether regions Daemon on the other side.

Bill motions to Kwan, who uses the Inferius as a door opener. The doors open slowly and you stare into the Great Room of the Temple. Is it just your imagination or is the Inferius struggling harder to get free of Kwan's magical grasp? Perhaps it doesn't want to be here either! You ease your broom into the room.

You feel the hair on your neck rise. There is a palatable feeling of fear and despair permeating this room. It reminds you of the moments at the lake with Sirius, right as you looked up and saw the scores of dementors circling. Are daemons and dementors somehow related?

The Great Room is about fifty meters in length with a concave roof that rises some thirty meters. Two things dominate the room. The large steps leading to what can only be a sacrificial altar and the creature perched on the altar like a throne. A hazy wall of magic only allows you to drift perhaps five meters into the room. Past the wall of magic, chests full of gold litter the ornate pews in a rather haphazard fashion. If this only the paltry remainder, then you'd hate to see all of it! Still, one object commands your attention – the Daemon.

A deep, rumbling bass voice greets you. "At long last, my adversaries arrive. I am eager to take your measure in person. Ah yes, the Curse Breaker, the Hit Wizard and the boy Hero. I see you did not accept Chilotha's oh so generous offer. Only a few realities offered that possibility. Oh, do come closer mortals! You are safe for the moment. My restraints are still there; sadly for you they will not be around much longer."

De Soto wasn't lying! The daemon is a monster. The smell of brimstone assaults your senses. The ram's head smiles an evil grin at you as it rises and descends the steps. It's doing this on purpose and projecting an aura of fear forcing the three of you back.

It continues in a cruel hiss as its forked tail pounds the stairs, "Yes. See the instrument of your doom. Let your tiny minds comprehend my glory. Know what you will soon face and know that you have no hope. I will feast on your souls. I will grind your bones into powder. The smell of freshly ground bone has always been one of my favorites. It has been far too long..."

You gulp and somehow force yourself forward. It's still caged. It can't hurt you. You repeat that like a mantra and force the broom forward.

"Good! Good! You still have spirit. I prefer the brave ones over the cowards. I'm glad you lived boy. The realities where you didn't offered precious little amusement to my farseeing eyes."

You find your voice. It takes a much longer than you thought it should to find and it certainly doesn't come out sounding like the brash arrogant insufferable son of James Potter. Instead, it is more of a croak combined with a whisper. "Glad you're not disappointed."

“Of course not Harry Potter, your death will be but the first of thousands.”

“Don’t you have to stay and guard the Horcrux?” Speaking of which, where is the damn thing?

One of its four arms pats its stomach. “I think I’ll take it with me. Adding its power to mine has allowed me to see things that might have happened and things that never will. I have seen so many things in my brief stay in this dimension. Would you care to hear some of them?”

“Not particularly.”

“Oh, you remind me of the few times it was someone named Neville here instead of you. He was always more of a brute; foolishly hoping to best me with force, but I know you Harry, you’re the more clever type – already thinking of a plan. Sadly for you, I’ve most likely already seen it. By all means put the wards on the steps outside of the Temple. The little man-eating plants will trim the fur on my legs back a bit. I’ve allowed them to become mangy over the last few years. Is the little fair haired girl here with you in this reality or is it the eagle’s offspring? No? Pity, the death cries of your females are so very pleasant. Perhaps, I shall seek both of them out, after I have disposed of you?”

Most people who claim to know you are always quick to point out that you are rash, impulsive and easy to anger. Given your upbringing, those particular quirks shouldn’t really be a surprise. Still, anger isn’t necessarily a bad thing. In your case, anger always seems to trump fear. “You sound pretty smug from inside your cage. I have little fantasies too, creature, but I live in reality. You’ve still got to get by us.”

It gestures with one of its clawed hands and the Dragonfly falters dropping both you and the broom to the ground. This is your first, but most likely not the last encounter with a Daemon’s nullification field.

“Learn your place mortal – at my feet! I am eternal. Your words are bold, but you lack any power to enforce them. I am power! The feeble energies you command are but a flicker of a candle and I am the burning glory of the sun!”

Kwan sticks his barely moving Inferius to the wall. He helps you stand and keep your weight off your injured foot. Bill is shaken out of his momentary paralysis and begins checking the binding circles. You simply glare at the monster as it regards you with seemingly casual interest.

You pull your wand out and try a simple light spell. The tiny glow is pathetic. You force more power into your spell and it grows marginally brighter. Both Kwan and Bill see what you’re doing and try a few spells of their own. The results are not very good ones. Kwan’s cutting curse barely severs the head of the almost paralyzed Inferius. Normally, it would have left a small trench in the wall behind it. You strain to make your light stronger and notice the Daemon’s gaze locked firmly on you. It can weaken you, but it can’t take your magic away. After a minute the standoff ends with you canceling your spell.

You look at Kwan and whisper, “What about a killing curse?”

The Daemon leans as close to the barrier as it can and laughs, “What do you think prompted your kind to start making these little baubles you call a Horcrux in the first place. I am body, but my soul is elsewhere, but do please try for yourself child. Try it right now in fact! I’ll lower my head and you can strike me now! You’ll never have a better chance! Hurry, before I change my mind...”

Bill warns, “Don’t even think about it Harry! Not while the bindings are still in force.”

Five minutes later, Bill looks up from the concentric rings and the runes surrounding them. The ones in the outer ring have already started disappearing. “Best I can tell no more than seventy-two hours.”

Spreading its four arms to accentuate its massive size the creature looks down at Bill, “I will tell you this one truth mortal, for I am feeling

generous. You are wrong. The barrier will fail on its own in sixty-eight hours. Of course, you could release me now and spare yourselves the agonizing wait? It matters little to me. I am patient. I was ancient long before your kind was little more than a talking monkey. Hours are but seconds to me."

As you turn to leave, you cast a glance over your shoulder at the creature. It has already turned and started stalking up the steps to the altar.

"My dying arse, it isn't it impatient!" The Dragonfly in your hands pulses again as the Daemon's hold on it relents.

The three of you get airborne avoiding and mostly ignoring the Inferi attracted by your presence.

Bill asks, "So, what did we just learn?"

You smile and add a bit of gallows humor, "That in sixty-eight hours, we're in deep shit?"

He shakes his head at you, "Even when it tells a truth, it isn't necessarily true. They'll fail on their own at that time. It'll break free before then. Never believe anything one of them says. What do you think Kwan? My guess is eight to twelve hours before that happens it'll make its move. So, we've really got at most sixty hours. Let's get back to the bank and figure out how we're going to fight this thing."

You watch Kwan nod and decide to add, "If they never tell the whole truth, does that mean that Dumbledore is part Daemon?" At least that gets a brief smile out of Bill.

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Bill and De Soto seem to have really hit it off. He's rather fascinated by the object and actually knows who this Bernini bloke was. You're 'borrowing' Maria's chisel to replace the one that was melted in the Bloodfire. Hopefully, you won't get a chance to thank her anytime soon. The bodies of your two fallen teammates have been moved into one of the small offices. The sadness over their loss will have to wait.

Kwan joins the group and shows that he knows a bit of carving and as the three of you begin chiseling in earnest; the statue describes how the city was destroyed.

The Cultists attacked during a quidditch game at the school, when most everyone was in a central location. Chilotha's followers were by no means overwhelming in numbers, but the confusion, surprise, and ferocity of the attack overwhelmed the population. They had already raised the Necro wards, which created even more havoc as those killed came back an hour later. The Necrodragon you finished had been Chilotha's 'pet'. It had been killed in the assault on the Ministry.

You listen as Hernando describes the harrowing days that followed the slaughter as the few remaining pockets of resistance fell to the Cult of the Winged Serpent or the horde of the damned that walked the street. For the next two months, from a secret room in the Ministry, the statue had conversed with paintings and learned that the city was being ransacked and that anything of value was being moved to the temple.

At the end of the third month the paintings told him that something had happened to the Cultists. All of them had joined the ranks of the Inferi. Only then did the statue leave its hiding place to see first hand what had become of the city. He spoke of his first encounter with the detached spirit of Chilotha and piecing together the truth behind the story of the destruction of this city.

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Six hours later, you set your chisel and pile of Dragon Bone aside and massage your aching wrists. You've been carving like a maniac. Bill's still much faster, but you are definitely getting better. Currently, you're trying to duplicate Maria's 'Old Faithful' ward and wondering if a geyser of scalding water will be enough to slow the wretched thing down.

Kwan and De Soto's return was bittersweet. Bill's Order journal glowed with the light of unread messages, but your journal did not. Bill gives you a sympathetic look as he hands it to you. You're a



pretty easy to read person and the disappointment on your face must be evident.

Dear Luna,

I'm taking a break from carving. This won't be a long note. I'm healing again. We've lost two more people. A dead wizard named Chilotha possessed Collins. He killed Thundercloud. I originally thought he had killed Bill. I took him on and the two of us beat the snot out of each other, until Kwan and Hack showed up and finished him. Kwan had to kill his best friend.

My broken foot should be usable by tomorrow. The other wounds are nasty. I never heard most of the spells Chilotha used, but the wounds he made are infected. Fortunately, my totem is helping fight off the curse. It's one of the perks of being an Animagus. So, I'll be back on my feet again, shortly.

I have to be. There's a demon here and the bindings keeping it imprisoned are failing. It'll be free soon and it has created some kind of barrier preventing us from leaving. Bill estimates maybe 48 hours before it breaks free. I met it. I don't know if you remember seeing me when I first came out and caught sight of the Horntail, but I think you get the idea. It taunted me. Apparently, it has some kind of divination powers. It must know quite a bit about me. It threatened to come after you after it's done with me. When you read this, go find Dumbledore and show him this. Hopefully, he's already found you.

There's a magical statue with us now. He's the echo of the Spanish Conquistador Hernando De Soto. Kwan's showing him how to shoot the AK-47 and my shotgun. We're not sure how many shots he'll get off before the Daemon uses its powers and neutralizes him, but we'll take every bit we can get.

I've been carving so much both my hands ache. We're going to make our stand here. For a change the hundreds of Inferi outside will help form a shield for us. We're going to set our wards in layers here and we're not going down without a fight. Bill was telling me about one of his favorite movies about a pair of Outlaws and their final stand.

Apparently, between the Daemon and the Inperi, the entire Bolivian Army is outside waiting for us.

Wish us luck, we'll need every bit we can get. I know it might sound selfish, but I'd really like to hear from you again.

Harry

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Bill tosses you the Order Journal. "I'm headed upstairs and outside to set up our first copy of the Armageddon ward. Go ahead and read for a bit. To borrow from our friend Maria, that Dumbledore has some serious cajones."

September 1st, 1996

William and Harry,

I must congratulate you on your numerous successes. I am curious how you managed to pierce the veil of secrecy that protects the city. Perhaps you will be kind enough to share this remarkable discovery? I must ensure that your method cannot be used against our Headquarters. I am also impressed that you managed to perpetrate such a ruse so successfully. In retrospect, it all makes so much sense now.

I have taken the liberty of reviewing the mission reports and came to the conclusion that Harry has been in some rather perilous situations in the past few weeks. Again your resourcefulness amazes me.

However, I must insist that Harry be returned to England as soon as possible. I understand that you probably will not get this message until you solve the quandary of being inside a location that you do not actually know, but it is imperative that Harry come back with all due haste. His presence at Hogwarts is vital to the safety of everyone and the war effort.

Harry, I assure you that I have a suitable training regimen prepared for your return. I have made arrangements for you to continue in Potions with Professor Slughorn. I will also be giving you private lessons concerning Mr. Riddle.

We have thus far been able to mostly conceal your absence, using a bit of polyjuice and a certain Auror's natural abilities. I fear that this ruse will not hold up under close scrutiny, so I encourage you to make haste back to Hogwarts.

I would like to apologize for the unfortunate sequence of events that triggered all this. You deserve a full accounting and I would prefer to do it in person.

Respectfully,  
Albus Dumbledore

Oh boy! You should pack right now and run off to Hogwarts to take Potions! That would solve everything wouldn't it! Too bad there's a little hitch in those plans, involving a Daemon. Suppressing your urge to choke someone you press on.

September 2nd, 1996

William and Harry,

I understand from your report that you encountered numerous Inferi and that you sustained losses. I am curious as to why you are working with the Goblins; I would urge caution in dealing with Goblins, when there is salvage to be had.

As there is not much I can add that I have not already covered, I will simply wish you good hunting. I would be remiss if I did not pass along this warning. I have no doubt in your skills, but I strongly recommend that you do not attempt to destroy the Horcrux. They are powerful and dangerous artifacts. I myself sustained a grievous injury in the destruction of one that I recovered over the summer.

I will reassure your friends that I have heard from you and that you are well. They are very concerned for your welfare and do hope to hear from you. All are eager to heal the breach in your friendship.

Respectfully,  
Albus Dumbledore

If you're willing to cast a killing curse, a Horcrux isn't necessarily that difficult to destroy. Why is he giving you advice anyway? You destroyed the Diary and Chlotho's just this morning. Based on results alone, you're more qualified on the subject than he is! Maybe it's a sign of all this stress, but there is this throbbing vein in your neck. At least it isn't on your forehead! Otherwise, you'd be turning into Vernon!

September 3rd, 1996

William,

Hopefully you will read this soon. I do not agree with your assessment that Tom would place his Horcrux in the vaults. I believe he would place more significance in other buildings that, perhaps, held a special meaning to him.

From what little I know of his history and that of the area, I suspect he was in league with a notable wizard of the area and former supporter of Grindlewald named Veras Chlotho. I understand that most hold him responsible for the disappearance of their city. To this day, he has a scattered following. They believe that he will return for his loyalists and lead them back to the city that is their promised land.

If I may be so bold as to offer a suggestion, I would search Chlotho's home. They were either in league or they were rivals. If Tom vanquished Veras, the site of the battle would be of great significance to him. As there has been no mention of Veras since then, I suspect he met a fitting end.

Again, I must reiterate that Harry's presence is required in England. I hope your injuries heal quickly and that Harry remains safe in your

care. Please tell Harry that I have informed his friends that he has been located. They hope he will return soon. You need only specify the date and time we should meet and I will come personally.

Respectfully,  
Albus Dumbledore

At first you want to scream that this is proof that even a blind squirrel can find a nut at some point, but you have to admit that Dumbledore does have a brain on his shoulder. He just chooses not to use it! You skim through the entries for the fourth and the fifth; it's more of the same condescending drive! You arrive at the most recent entry.

September 6th, 1996

Dear Harry,

First, I must express my condolences on your loss. Losing a team member is never easy. I also hope that William's injuries are on the mend and will pass on the information to Miss Delacour after I finish writing this.

I gather from the tone of your letter that you are quite angry with me at the moment. Again, I apologize for any transgressions against you. I shall endeavor to explain myself.

Other than Occlumency and the Patronus training, I believe we discussed the lack of training in my office after your Godfather's tragic demise. I wished you to have a childhood and it was only the events of the Triwizard tournament that forced me to recognize the error of my ways. I would have begun training you when your name came out of the Goblet, were it not for the rules that forbade any additional coaching of the participants.

The end of the tournament also amplified the danger of your connection to Tom. As you are quick to point out, I am quite human and prone to mistakes like everyone else. Until you master Occlumency, I did not wish to draw Tom's attention to you any more than necessary.

I had hoped this year would be different. I must admit to my part in dosing you with the attraction potions. It was my intention to help you foster a relationship with Miss Granger in the hopes that, much like your parent's relationship, she would provide the same level of support and stability which Lily provided to James in his darkest hours.

I did not count on young Mr. Weasley's attraction for Miss Granger upsetting this arrangement.

I was busy on a different project, when Arthur and Molly opted to change out Miss Granger for their daughter. I was not consulted in this and under no circumstances would I have agreed to any obliations. I can only hope my words can properly convey my sincerity on this point. I will also pass on your warning to them, but hope as time passes you will find it in your heart to overlook their errors in judgment. I have, in my own fashion, expressed my disappointment with them in this matter.

As to your finances, again I must ask for your forgiveness. I made terrible assumptions and I did not even consider asking for your permission. In doing so, I have injured your relationship with Remus, who is quite distraught over the entire affair. I ask that you place the blame for this squarely on my shoulders. Remus acceded to my wishes in your best interests.

I see only in hindsight, that I have run roughshod through your life like a veritable herd of Hippogriffs through a crystal ball shop. I would only ask that you give me the opportunity to make amends.

Respectfully,  
Albus Dumbledore

Words fail you. Coherent thought fails you. Bill should have saved this for right before the Daemon gets here! The anger might have given your spells the extra power they needed to really damage it! You grab a quill. This deserves a response.

Dumbledore,

We have somewhat succeeded in reopening the lines of communications. I have had what you might call an eventful day. We don't need to ration out Dreamless sleep anymore. That minor problem has been taken care of.

Unfortunately, that problem was Veras Chilotha. Riddle wasn't the only one with a Horcrux here. Chilotha was a disembodied spirit and he did a Quirrel on Jake Collins. I was able to destroy his Horcrux and Kwan finished Chilotha, but not before Chilotha killed Thundercloud. By the way, you might want to remember that there is no defense for the Killing Curse. The same applies to a Horcrux. Take it from the boy who has destroyed more of them than you!

That's the good news. Yeah, losing two more party members is the good news. Do you really want the bad news? The bad news is there is a bound Daemon here guarding Riddle's Horcrux. It literally ate it and it's erected some kind of barrier that prevents us from leaving.

The even worse news is the bindings on the Daemon are failing. Chilotha's life force was bound into them. They'll be down in about 60 hours, but we can only assume the creature will break out before then.

Any advice on Daemon fighting would be appreciated. I understand you and a few others fought a lesser one in the past. This one is about 7 meters tall, 4 arms, a ram's head and legs if that helps any.

So in summary, we're down to 3 wizards, a troll and our new friend – a living statue of Hernando De Soto. We have to fight a Daemon. You'll know if it gets by us. I'm guessing the path of destruction across South America will be hard to miss. It'll have the Horcrux in its stomach.

Right now, I couldn't give a shit about who wants to make it up to me. My timetable is full for the next seventy or so hours. Check back after that. Have your people get in touch with my people!

If you're looking for forgiveness, I'm sorry to say I don't have any to spare. You'll just have to live with it. Considering what I am up against that probably means it'll just be you doing the living.

Cordially yours,  
Harry James Potter

"Harry, do you want to come up to the balcony? I'm going to test the Purple Armageddon ward."

"Just let me climb onto my broom and I'll float on up there."

A few minutes later, you're floating up there. Kwan moves over to you and peels the bandaging from your thigh carefully avoiding your Jaguar totem stuck to the skin. "Totem seems to be helping. Cursed flesh reverting – always thought that was a myth. We should move it to around your foot. Cursed wound might annoy you, but you need to be able to use foot soon." After Thundercloud had broken his leg fighting against the Goblins a few weeks ago, he showed you how to use your totem to help speed healing. You have no idea if it has been in your possession long enough to really work, but the results speak for themselves.

Kwan's logic is sound and you cancel out the sticking charm and help him relocate it to your ankle. The tiny jaguar feels warm. "Did you take Thundercloud's totem? If we get out of here, we should get it back to his family."

The Korean smiles at you and pats a pouch that must contain the eagle totem. "Worry about surviving first, anything else can wait."

Bill interrupts, "Okay gentlemen, let's try out our own copy of Purple Armageddon. I've got it set up on the other side of the street. One Curious George coming up!"

Bill easily transfigures a brick left behind the wards into a small orange monkey. It proceeds to jump up and down and make noises, which attracts the attention of the ever present mob.



Sure enough they turn towards it and several begin pushing forward. You see the first one approaching the edge of the wards. The wards flare and a stream of purple energy crackles into the creature disintegrating it. The mob falters as the energy sweeps across the front ranks destroying several of them. For a moment the push of the Inferi behind them pushes another ten into the 'kill zone', but the rest are already falling back retreating from the lethal wards. Hack is whistling and cheering as each Inferi gets toasted. He knows a big evil monster is coming and wants to do his best to crush its skull – ignorance is bliss. You almost wish you didn't know what was coming.

When it stops, you share a look with Bill and Kwan; everyone has the same basic realization. Bill is the first to voice it. "Damn that's right! They can't see yellow and red, but they can see purple!"

"Probably would have been more useful a few days ago." You reply, but you can see the wheels in Bill's head turning. "What is it?"

"Fleur and I were watching this one movie on the telly. Oh don't give me that look, we occasionally stopped to rest. It was called City Slickers. You ever seen it? No, I guess not. It was about a group of guys, who knew nothing about handling animals going on a cattle drive." He's bouncing up and down, even on his injured legs, like a little kid, reminding you of Ron, when he has to pee.

Kwan rubs his chin thoughtfully. You're still trying to determine what Bill is saying. You decide to demonstrate your masterful command of the English language, "Huh?"

"The first thing I thought when I saw that thing was 'We need a fucking army'. Gentlemen, look below you. I present our army! We're going to have ourselves the great Inferi cattle drive of 1996. We're going to cram a thousand Inferi right down its fucking throat and see how much it likes that! We'll still ward the bank and fall back here if this doesn't work, but I say we hit it as hard as we can when it's trying to come out of the Temple."

Someone once said, 'The best defense is a good offense.' It's a fine saying and it's so very true. If the lying Daemon is to be believed, it may have already seen this many times, but seeing yourself fight an

army of walking dead is one thing – actually doing it might be another thing all together. For you, life has reached a new level of ‘bizarre’. You’re about to lead an army of the dead into battle and you’re probably still the underdog. Last time you checked, you’re still a good guy – right?

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Author’s notes – As you may have noticed, Bill isn’t as dead as many of you thought. It was always supposed to be Thundercloud that died there. This was not a knee jerk reaction to the reviews insisting Bill live. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have bothered giving the female Goblin that armband back in chapter 14.

Of course, Bill and the rest are safe for the moment, but the final battle of this story is coming next chapter...

If you haven’t already, give my new story, The Lie I’ve Lived, a try. Thanks for reading, Jim.

Disclaimer – You are Harry Potter. Soon you will either be the Slayer of Daemons or you'll be dead. The prospects in your life have been bleak at times, but this particular 'situation' is a clear winner. At least it ties in with the fact that JKR owns you. What did you ever do to her anyway? You're the one in the life or death situations and she's making all the profit! How's that fair?

Acknowledgements - I can't say enough about the folks at Alpha Fight Club. They constantly challenge me to produce something more worthy of putting out there. This chapter goes out without FairyQilan's helping hand, but ZanyMuggle did a rather comprehensive prebeta and I decided to put it out before I leave for vacation. In addition to the folks at AFC, I'd like to thank Crys and Aaran St. Vines for taking time to comment on the chapter prior to its release. I know, enough of this crap! Let's get this show on the road.

## Chapter 22 – This Game that We Animals Play is a Winner

September 8th, 1996

It's funny how 'Life' can be measured. Most folks your age don't even stop to consider it. They're as 'immortal' as far as they're concerned – never stopping to wonder how it will all end. Look how far that got Cedric. He was a stand up guy. You might get a chance to tell him soon, but you hope not.

That gets you back to the measuring part. Time is ticking away. There's one of two ways this is going to end. You'll either be dead soon or you won't be. What was once sixty hours has shrunk to a mere thirty-six. Your hands are numb from the carving chisel, but at least it's offset by the throbbing pain in your ankle. Pain is your friend. It reminds you that you're still alive.

Setting your carving tools down, you take a moment to rub some cream onto your wrists and feel the penetrating warmth pierce the numbness in your hands. It reminds you of batty old Arabella Figg always rubbing cream for her joint ailments. Hell, considering that she turned out to be a squib, you might even be using the same stuff. A quick check with the old sniffer confirms that it's the same cabbage smelling stuff. You always wondered where the smell came from,

when in fact she was using a magical balm all along – right in front of your little mushroom arse. Yeah that's right – Harry 'Shroom' Potter, kept in the dark and fed a bunch of shit.

You swill some juice down the gullet; gagging and wishing that you had drank first before applying the stink-balm. Another misstep you can learn from. How many more errors will the fates allow you to make, before it throws the fatal one your way?

You adjust your glasses and look down at the Dragonbone spear in your hands. Bill's shaping spell did a nice job creating a blade for the three meter long piece. It's a stabbing spear and not a throwing one. You're carving a group of three runes right out of a household warding book. These self-sharpening runes were meant for knives and cleavers, but spears work just the same. You space them out on the open face of the spear tip, to form a triangle. In the middle of the triangle you carve a Celtic rune symbolizing 'pain' and hope that it adds to the wounding ability of the spear. Hack will need every advantage you can give him against that monster.

Kwan's got a cauldron of growth serum boiling. It's meant for Humans and no one knows if or how well it'll work on your troll buddy, but it's worth a try. You move down to the shaft. Norse is the choice for this set. Translated they mean 'Cursed Enemies'. You wonder how much crap all the guys in the Gryffindor dorms would give you if they could see you outlining your pencil traces with nail polish. That's right, ladies, gentlemen and trolls of all ages – nail polish: the Cursebreakers best friend. Bill's good enough that he uses a toothpick in for fine work, but you are still mastering the little applicator brush. Bill laughed at you when you asked why he didn't show you this earlier. His answer of, "If you don't learn to do it the long way, you'll never appreciate the shortcuts," didn't sit well with you.

You can cook, clean, and use nail polish. It's surprising that you don't have a girlfriend already. Bill was nice enough to tell you that you'd make some guy very happy someday; he followed it with a theory about Percy swinging that way. Oh wait; there are all those life and death situations – that's probably the reason for your lack of female companionship.

Once the runes are painted, you start in on the carving with the chisel, tapping with a hammer to make the indentations and then pushing the shavings aside. Much of wardcrafting is repetitive work. You doubt that most would have the right mindset for it. Using Bill as an example, you have to be creative, obsessive, and apparently have a violent streak that you carefully suppress around the folks that 'just wouldn't understand'.

Bill is working on another Purple Armageddon. Hopefully, the three of them and everything else you have in the 'kitchen sink' will do more than just give the Daemon a tummy ache. Bill's a good man and he has everything to live for. He's the big brother you never had and always wanted. You thought you'd lost him once and Chilotha learned one last lesson in the mortal realm – an angry Harry Potter is a dangerous Harry Potter.

Kwan and De Soto are retrieving the journals and Hack's thunderous snores can be heard from the other side of the lobby turned throne room. Makes you wonder how the battle would have gone, if Chilotha had saved the energy he wasted on the whole 'omnipotent wizard' transfiguration of all this and used it in the fight.

If the Daemon gets past the five of you, thousands will die both Magical and Mundane. It doesn't really care, now does it? Too bad none of the books in De Soto's stash are titled Daemons and Their Weaknesses. How about Banishment for Beginners – Back to the Nether Regions in Five Easy Steps? Of course, if they were, they'd be in Spanish, Portuguese, Toltec or Mayan, so maybe it wouldn't be worth the headache anyway.

The dry humor keeps you going as you finish 'Cursed Enemies' and flip it over and begin the linking line to the controller rune. Only thing left is to carve the 'Unbreakable' set. It looks pretty empty though. With a bit of inspiration, you grab the nail polish and inscribe a few more characters on the shaft.

As you begin carving them Bill looks at your work curiously, "What are you doing over there, Harry?"

"It needs a name. The three question marks are from a fairy tale. The Troll asks you three questions. If you don't get them right, he kills you. I figured that I would name it before I carve the Unbreakable runes."

"Sounds like a winner, Harry. Do you have any other bright ideas on fighting this thing?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to fight a creature that can see everything we can possibly come up with. Even with hundreds of Inferi, I feel like we're the underdogs. Every time I've fought somebody, they've underestimated me and I've been able to use that to my advantage. That's just not going to happen this time. If anything, it's overestimating me."

Bill considers what you said for a minute, "Harry you're a genius. It's seen everything we can do right? Well let's confuse the hell out of it. If that's the case, it's probably seen itself lose a few times. The more cluttered the battlefield is, the more it will be looking around for some kind of danger sign."

You stare at him stupidly wondering where this is going as he continues, "It'll be looking for all the signs that something isn't going well. Everything we can use to slow it down means another spell we can hit it with. What else have we got? I doubt any of Fred and George's crap will be any more than a distraction to it, but we should look at different types of potions. Spells don't have a lot of affect against it, but potions might remain unchanged. You ever brew up a batch of boom juice?"

"I've had five years of Potions with Neville Longbottom. I've seen my fair share of cauldron explosions. Heck, our very first lesson he made some kind of blistering agent. I bet I can reproduce it. We can use some buckets and banish them into it."

"I'm sure Kwan knows a few recipes and I can recreate some of the twins more memorable disasters."

Bill feels his holstered wand, "Kwan and De Soto just crossed the perimeter alarm upstairs. Maybe Dumbledore will have some more

ideas to add.” Kwan hands the glowing journal to Bill and sets the non-glowing journal down.

Dear William and Harry,

I have arrived in Sao Paulo with Alastor. Our communications should be easier now. I shall start with the obvious, if there is a way for you to leave, I strongly suggest you flee. It is not that I doubt your courage or your skills. Quite the opposite, I believe you will fight to the best of your abilities.

You say the Daemon has raised a type of barrier preventing living beings from crossing. If you recall our visit to the house where Professor Slughorn was hiding, he transfigured himself into what appeared to be an inanimate object. Perhaps, this barrier can be fooled.

If flight is not an option, I recommend hiding and conserving your supplies. Consider this practical advice. The Daemon will be impatient with its freedom. If you can outlast it, it will leave. It is likely too large to fit in all but the main tunnels under the bank. The moment I hear word that the creature has escaped; I will offer my assistance to the Brazilian authorities.

Should both flight and hiding be impractical and you are forced to fight, I recommend avoiding direct damage spells. Banishing items into it will counteract its resistance. Litter the battlefield and impede its progress. Attack it from multiple sides and use your numbers to your advantage. The books I have consulted indicate that some may generate auras of terror, panic and despair. The one I fought did not have this ability.

As I have stated, it is not a matter of your abilities, rather the overwhelming nature of your opponent. I wish you the best of luck no matter what course of action you are forced into choosing.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Bill looks up from reading the entry. "Well that was mostly useless. We can try the transfiguration thing, but the Daemon's magic is different from ours. The hiding thing, I'm not so sure. Who says it can't change size? Hell, it might even be able leave the barrier up when it leaves or set up a small one just around the bank. Plus, the thing can see the future, so once it gets out into the open; it's not exactly going to run into situations where it doesn't think it can win. We have to stop it here and now, if you know what I mean?"

The statue chimes in from over by the pile of cauldrons, "From the few conversations I had with Chilotha's disembodied spirit, I believe that the monster will raze the city before it leaves. If you choose to retreat into the tunnels, you should consider trying to tunnel your way out of the mountain."

You shake your head. "I think being buried alive once is one time too many. I'm not sure we'd survive another time. We've got two sappers still. Think they would weaken the barrier enough for us to get out?"

"I took them out there while you were sleeping. They didn't do anything but charge. The barrier was unaffected."

You look up hopefully, "How about we blow them up? It could disrupt the barrier."

"Let me think this through for a sec." You watch him scratch his chin, "It might work, could kill us too, but if we're going to risk offing ourselves like that, how about we blow them up on the Daemon instead?"

"That ability it has to weaken magic will take a big bite out of them."

Bill nods his head and looks over at the other remaining wizard in your group, "That makes the odds of it not killing us a bit better. It'll still probably be strong enough collapse the temple on it. What do you think Kwan?"

The Korean thinks it over. "Attack it while it is still contained in the bindings. Daemon won't get close enough to sappers otherwise. Start battle on our terms instead of Daemon's."



Bill starts talking with Kwan and De Soto about the best formulas for explosive potions, as they set out several cauldrons and start sifting through potion ingredients. They agree on using a chemical trigger to detonate the sappers and are discussing filling vials and hanging around the necks of the Inferi and turning them into mobile bombs. That beats your idea of giving a Daemon a nasty rash.

Oddly enough, De Soto can brew potions, but can't carve runes. When you ask it why, it responds that part of rune carving is about the intent of the carver. Since he isn't technically a living creature it won't work. He does offer a suggestion to you that your next weapon should use Toltec runes. His rationale is if the Daemon was summoned using Toltec rituals, a runic weapon using that magic might be more effective against it. It's probably a load of crap, but magic is really all about intent of the caster and if you believe Toltec runes against a Daemon summoned in South America will work better than other types of runes then it'll probably work.

You finish the Unbreakable runes and activate the controller runes to 'turn the spear on'. It's crude, but it looks effective. Carrying it across the lobby, you set it next to the stirring troll. He smiles at your work and holds the weapon like a newborn baby.

"Hack like Puny Harry's spear. Can't wait to use." He stands up and begins taking experimental thrusts with the spear and wraps some rope around the shaft where he wants his grip to be.

You could actually wait a few weeks for him to use it, but that's not going to happen now is it? "I've got enough time to get you a shield and maybe a club. Which one do you want more?"

Hack takes only a second to think it over, "Shield, Hack use stab with spear and block with shield."

Sifting through the pile of Dragonbone that dominates one corner of the lobby, you opt for a sizeable chunk of the creature's breastbone. You cast a few cutters to break it free from the few chunks of remaining ribs and begin shaping it using the carving spell Bill taught you. You focus on a roughly oval shape and are pleased as the solid

mass of bone begins conforming to the image in your mind. You use a couple of temporary sticking charms to affix the straps cut off of Glurg's old shield and have Hack test it to see how it fits on him.

"It'll feel lighter when I add a couple of charms to it, but how does it feel right now?"

Hack nods appreciatively, but wants the straps adjusted slightly higher and made a bit more taut. It takes three attempts, but he's satisfied with the position of the shield and the tension of the straps. You mark the spot with nail polish apply the adhesive potion – fearing that the straps would simply fall off if you used a charm. Taking three of the smaller curving teeth, you arrange them on the front to form a crude shield boss with two of the fangs curving upwards between one curving downwards. The troll eyes the improvement to the design.

"Hack like to bash with shield, but bash goes like this and not like this!" He gestures with his arms showing you the motion across his body and you rearrange the teeth with two pointing left and the third pointing right. You're not really an expert on shield design now are you?

With more liberal use of the adhesive, the fangs are affixed to the shield forming the shield boss. Using a carpenter's pen you trace the twelve runes that you are going to carve into the front side of the shield. Once done you use the nail polish to outline your tracings and start carving.

"Bill, how are you going to reply to Dumbledore?"

Bill looks up from the potion ingredients he is dicing and says, "I reckon we'll mention that the Daemon has precognitive abilities and if it isn't fought here and now, there's no guarantee that they'll be able to get it in the wild. Next break, Kwan and I will run out and try that transfiguration thing, but I'm guessing it won't work. How long is that shield going to take you?"

"Two hours. Three hours max."

“After that everyone takes a nap and then we all fly over to the temple and start setting the OK corral up. A lot of Inferi should follow us. There are some big stone blocks from one of the smaller collapsed pyramids. We’re going to levitate them and set up places for us to stand that the Inferi can’t get up on. De Soto is going up on a roof with the M21. He’s gotten good enough with it and that’s got a longer range than the AK, which should keep him outside the Daemon’s range. We’ll keep that and your shotgun with us.”

The statue nods, “It should be easy to hit something that big. I just do not know if this man made weapon will do much damage to a hellspawn.”

Bill just claps his hands together. “Doesn’t matter, we do as much damage to it as we can. If we injure it enough, people on the outside might be able to kill it. Harry’s going to make Portkeys for us to fall back here. If they won’t work, we’ll try brooms and carpets. If that doesn’t work either, then it’s been nice knowing you in this life, gentlemen.”

As you work on your carving, Kwan pronounces the growth serum ready for testing. He fills a bowl and hands it to the Troll who drinks it. Seconds pass and nothing happens, but then Hack begins to swell in size rising from his three meter mark to just under five meters. His shirt and trousers rip, reminding you of that green superhero from the comic books. Bill clicks the stopwatch to note the time it took for the dosage to affect the troll and clicks it again to time the duration.

Hack’s increased size lasts only two minutes and fades while you are setting up a second set of straps on the shield for his increased size. Though Hack will only be just a bit over the Daemon’s waistline, it’s an improvement. Kwan begins bottling the rest as Hack’s stretched clothes fall to his feet and you get a closer look at the troll than you ever wanted. No wonder the girl trolls like Hack!

As you return to your carving, your eyes wander over to your correspondence journal. It hurts a bit. You would have liked to hear from Luna again. Do you even want to write another goodbye note? It seems a bit pointless now doesn’t it? You’ve probably said all you can say – not much heart left to pour out is there?

Damn, there's so much Dragonbone dust in the air around you, that some must have gotten into your eyes. Just wipe it away and keep carving.

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After returning from a big fat failure at attempting to fool the barrier, Bill tries to get you to sleep. Sure, no problem there, Bill. Just lie back and relax, and let your cares drift away. Like that's really going to work!

"Stupefy!" You manage an angry look at a grinning Kwan as the bolt of energy hits you and you fall over with the last conscious thought being, "I suppose that'll work."

Sometime later you wake up somewhat bleary-eyed. Bill looks at his watch and shakes his head. "Stupefy!" Damn this is getting old quickly!

In the end you get just about five hours. Bill and Kwan each took half that amount. You don't know whether or not to be flattered or angry. "You needed the rest and quite frankly, you're the most powerful wizard out of the three of us. You're also just coming off a fight. Harry, we need everything you've got. If any of us has enough power to punch spells through its hide, it's going to be you."

Your anger deflates a tad. It's hard to stay mad after someone tells you how much they're counting on you. "I'll do my best Bill."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you." He pauses for a moment and points over at the table, "I threw together some sandwiches. When we finish off the Daemon, you need to pop out and get us some supplies. I used the last of the PB and J. All we got left is bologna. Hack doesn't mind it, but I'm not sure I'll ever eat it again."

With DeSoto still working the cauldrons, Bill wakes Kwan up. Hack joins you as the four of you share your last meal. The four of you eat in a sullen silence. As you finish up, Bill gets out a sheet of paper and an envelope for you and Kwan.

He pulls a sealed envelope out of his trunk and sets it on the table. "I've already filled mine out. It's my will and testament and instructions for my burial. Kwan, do you want to stick with the one you gave me at the beginning of all this? Okay, it's just you Harry."

How many sixteen year olds, fill out a will? Who is still left that you really want to give anything to? Well, here goes nothing...

I, Harry James Potter, do hereby declare that this is my last will and testament. In the likely event of my demise in the near future, I would like the following things to happen.

To either of the survivors of this mess - William Weasley or Kwan Chang Ho, leave one quarter of my material assets and my profound respect for treating me like a man. I would be more specific, however I have no idea what my assets actually are. In the event that either of the above is also joining me on the next great adventure, Fleur Delacour will receive Bill's share and whomever Kwan designates as his beneficiary receives his share.

The next one quarter of my assets is to be given to Fleur Delacour with the hopes that she will share some with her younger sibling.

The final one quarter I would like split between Lauren Starless Sky of the Lakota Sioux, Rubeus Hagrid, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom. You four deserve more happiness than life has given you. Lauren, I wish I had taken you up on your more than generous offer – I'm still regretting it. Luna, I would like you to have my cloak and my map – may they serve you well.

That disposes of my material assets. I would like thirty sickles placed on a plate and given to each of the following people. If they do not understand the significance of their thirty pieces of silver, Hermione should be kind enough to explain it and my sentiments behind the gesture.

Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, Fred Weasley, George Weasley, Ginevra Weasley, Molly Weasley, Arthur Weasley and Remus Lupin.

To Percy Weasley, I leave the assurance that you were right about your family all along and my Weasley family jumper to remind you that it wasn't just you.

To Charlie Weasley, I leave my Firebolt broom under the condition that the Firebolt is never used by Ginevra or Ronald. Bill assures me that you are a better person than the rest of that lot and I trust him with my life.

Free my owl, Hedwig. If she allows one of you to take her, she is more forgiving than I.

To Remus Lupin, you are either a traitor or you are easily misled. I don't really care at this moment. I leave you my photo album. Sit and stare at it. Maybe you'll figure out where you went wrong.

To Dobby the free elf, I leave my thanks and any of my clothes you care to take.

To Francisco Colastos (Machado), I leave my copy of Gollinard's and the hopes that you will put it to good use many years from now.

I disown the Dursley family, but would like them to be provided a complete list of my assets and one knut each, so that they can know exactly how much I was worth even if I did not.

To Draco Malfoy, I leave a snitch. Even with me being dead, you still probably won't catch it, but maybe one of these days...

To Severus Snape, I leave a slinky for no other reason than to make you wonder why I am doing this.

To Albus Dumbledore, I leave nothing except my old hand-me-down clothes from the Dursleys. I do not leave my forgiveness, gratitude or respect. You'll have to walk the road you paved with good intentions. Don't expect any comforting words from me.

Finally, to Tom Riddle also known as Lord Voldemort, I offer my congratulations and one knut. Perhaps now that I am gone, you're fair

game for everyone else. I recommend you start looking over your shoulder...

Anything else I have is up for grabs. You vultures can pick over it at your leisure.

Harry James Potter

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'The Great Ineri Cattle Drive of 1996' is coming along nicely. Hack and Kwan are floating slowly out in front on the tattered old magic carpet with the troll dangling his legs in front of the ravenous zombie horde like he is sitting on the edge of a pool. Kwan conjures a small animal or two to keep steering them. You and Bill are flying along the sides casting the colored flames and driving any of the Ineri that start wandering away from the herd – Harry Potter, magical cowboy. Well actually, it's South America so – Harry Potter, magical gaucho. You need an enchanted bolo. That'd be cool.

One of the Ineri captures your attention. It's an Abraxan with a broken wing and both its back legs broken, but still dragging itself forward. Perseverance, you like that in your zombie hordes. Any zombie horde you get from here on out will be held to this standard!

You know you're being a bit silly, but it helps take your mind off the almost impossible task ahead of you. The dull thud of so many feet on the pavement is like the monotone beat of an army. The bizarre procession heads down the main street towards the large school and the nearby temple.

Your mood sobers upon entering the main square and your good humor evaporates. This courtyard might be the last place you ever see. If you fall here, your animated corpse will likely wander here until Riddle comes back to check on his Horcrux. Would he recognize you? Take you back to England and turn you into some kind of trophy?

Banishing the morbid thoughts from your mind you circle back to pick up more stragglers. This continues for a good thirty minutes while the

horde is moved into position and temporary firewalls are set up to keep them from wandering off. It's almost like an angry mob waiting for a politician to come out and address them. The Daemon's 'press conference' is scheduled for roughly one hour from now. There will be a violent explosion followed by a question and answer session. Please keep your questions brief and to the point. The Daemon will then interact with the audience as time allows. Finally, there will, hopefully, be a victory buffet served in the lobby of Gringotts for all those with special invitations.

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The stark scene in front of you is probably a metaphor for your life. Your life should have been more fun. It's been exciting, bordering on terrifying – to say the least! Still, there isn't any sense in trying to delude yourself about how enjoyable your life has actually been.

Standing on a block of stone three meters high you watch the remaining Inferi herded out through the temporary firewalls. Kwan spread a bunch of oily goop that will make the permanent firewalls slightly inside the temporary ones. It should keep them back for a few minutes – provided the potion being spread all over it keeps the colors right.

The courtyard in front of the temple has been divided into zones for your battle. The area around the temple is the initial combat area. The Daemon will have to wade its way through the horde of Inferi in the area. You're not kidding yourself. They'll just slow it down. Even the ones that have necklaces decorated with vials of 'boom juice' around their necks.

After the firewall is the ward zone, three purple armageddons, three 'fun with severing charms', two pocket geysers, two 'fields of screams', two of Fred and George's portable swamps, five other one shot wards and a half dozen of Kwan's origami firebombs comprise the wards waiting for it once it crosses the firewall barrier. Past the 'ward zone' is the carefully constructed 'safe zone' littered with debris that can be banished into the Daemon.



So many ideas were discussed and discarded. Conjured and transfigured items were deemed unlikely to last long enough to seriously affect the Daemon. You still liked the idea of all these transfigured bear traps, but after wasting a half hour trying to make one, Bill advised you to stick to what you can do for the time being.

While you and Bill were carving your little arms off, Kwan was out here pushing around these massive blocks you're standing on. No wonder he looked knackered when he got back from picking up the journals. You aren't even sure you could lift them. When you asked him about it, he just smiled and said that he didn't. He used a spell to make the ground slick and used banishers to nudge them into the courtyard.

So here's the last line of defense – the four of you standing on these big blocks. You're on the right. Kwan's in the middle. Bill's on the left. Hack is standing on his stone which is closer to the 'ward zone' than the others. Kwan thinks that it'll come straight for you and he and Bill should get free shots at its backside. Hack will drink his growth serum and try and hold it off while the rest of you continue to hammer away at it with spells and firearms. You salute De Soto from his shooters position on top of a nearby two story building. He has a dozen twenty round magazines and the intention of firing every last round.

You look over at Hack, who is nervously thumping his spear against his shield. Three gourds filled with growth serum sit on the rock at his feet, next to several small stones and a ridiculously huge handgun. You and Bill concocted the idea of shrinking and lightening some large stones. Hack gets to play a high stake game of Plunk. Hack should be able to hurl them and as they hit the Daemon's negation field, they'll grow and become heavier without losing their speed. The results should be pleasant.

Hack's gun is an engorged Browning 9 millimeter. The troll's packing heat! Magic has truly turned it into a 'hand canon'. Hopefully, he'll be able to use it before the charms on it fail. He only has one thirteen round ammo clip to work with. Growth charms never seem to work just the same. Subtle variations in the magic seem to cause this.

Bill's rearranging the runes of the closest severing charms. Kwan has finished getting rid of the Inferi in the 'ward zone' and is flying back to his perch.

Inside the temple is a big wet streak, more of the oily flammable goop that no one is sure what it is. It leads to the two sappers and four jugs of Kwan's special 'boom juice'. You get to light the fire from your Dragonfly and Portkey back to your spot behind your stonewall. Over two hundred meters separates you from the blast, but Bill assures you that it's going to be a big one.

Finally, there's nothing left to do. All four of you are on your platforms lost in your own thoughts. Bill sighs loudly. "Anyone have any last requests. If you have to pee now's the time." Everyone gets a laugh out of it. "I said it before and I'll say it again – it's been an honor. Now let's finish this! Harry, whenever you're ready. Let's get this show on the road."

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It would be nice to be flying on the Firebolt one more time, but you've come to like the Dragonfly. The air rushes by as you pick up speed and look at the courtyard from a bird's eye view. The hundreds of Inferi mill about the entrance to the temple. You wonder if you'll be joining them in an hour or so. What's it like being an Inferius? You'd just kind of hang around all the time looking for something to kill?

You stop by the building where Hernando is set up in his shooter's nest. "Good luck."

"The 'real' Hernando De Soto died long ago. He was tired of wars and fighting. It is one of the reasons I was made, in the hopes that I could provide counsel to future generations and avoid such horrors. If we are victorious, this city will be rebuilt and I can try again."

"It sounds like a noble calling."

"It would be nice if more people were to take it up. Fight well young warrior."

You go full out on a quick trip around the cavern, enjoying 'one last moment in the sun' as it were and pull into position above the temple. Raising your wand up in a dueler's salute you meet each of your comrade's eyes. It's a powerful moment – the last bit of calm before the storm. You cast an incendio at the liquid fuse and activate the Portkey as the fire starts racing towards the sappers.

Reappearing behind your block you duck and cover waiting for the largest explosion that's about to come. For a second you're afraid that it didn't work, but then you hear the blast and the shaking of the ground around you. You use your broom and fly back up to your granite island. You chug a pepper up potion and use your wand to clear the dust cloud billowing out from the wreckage as the remainder of the temple begins to fall. A few of the Inferi were blown backwards through the firewall and were incinerated by the wards.

Briefly, you entertain the notion that nothing could have survived that, but you know it isn't going to be that easy. Even your 'inner eye' can tell you that! It's just a matter of time before that thing digs itself out. Bill's waiting for the first sign of the damn thing to ignite the inner firewall. Minutes pass. You've got the pepper-up 'jitters'. You should have waited to drink that potion. It's tempting to grab the Dragonfly and do a quick flyover, but you resist the urge.

The crack of the rifle tells you that Hernando on the roof has spotted something. You can't quite see what he is firing at as several fallen columns block your view. The statue shouts, "It's coming out of the wreckage near the center!"

"There! I see it!" Bill shouts raising the rifle and firing a shot. Over the top of the fallen column, you see a clawed hand grab onto the stonework. The Daemon's pulling itself free as the Inferi are shambling towards it. The hand becomes an arm as the creature removes more debris. Kwan begins firing his rifle as the creature's head becomes visible. Moments later it stands upright among the rubble already tossing Inferi aside in all directions. When it strikes the fourth or fifth one, there is a small detonation as the potion-equipped Inferius explodes.

It's a long way off, but you fire a percutio. The concentrated magic of the piercing curse might be strong enough to penetrate the Daemon's thick hide. It connects, instead with an Inferius clutched in its upper right arm and being used like a shield and a club.

"Freedom!" The Daemon's voice booms like a sonorous charm. Sadly, it looks far more eager than injured. You remind yourself that Daemonic magic seems to be defensive in nature - auras of fear, magical negation fields and barriers preventing people from fleeing. Combined with its size, strength, dense flesh and ferocity and it's a pretty nasty package.

Bill, Kwan and De Soto continue the rifle fire as the Daemon wades through the mass of the dead. Three of the four arms clear a path as the fourth drops the zombie and grabs a hunk of stone. It uses the boulder like a shield in front of its face as a bullets ricochet off of it. Its cloven hooves trample the hapless zombies into the ground. Apparently, it doesn't really care about the rest of its body. You cast a reductor which is blocked with the rock blowing chunks of it away. The Daemon discards the rock and scoops up another one. Shit! This is getting you nowhere!

As you hurl another long distance love tap at the nether monster, you picture Uncle Vernon kicking his way through an army of poodles. That's what it reminds you of, minus the ram's head and all that.

Congratulations. Your most damaging long range spell has given it the equivalent of a paper cut. Only a few hundred more and it might actually feel something. Too bad the Necrodragon is long gone. You could use one about now.

Holstering your wand, you grab the rifle sitting next to the shotgun. You're not very good with the replica Winchester 1873, but if you're going to get the same results, then you might as well conserve your strength. The 1873 is pretty wimpy compared to the penetrating power of the other rifles, as you recall Dudders going through his cowboy phase – one guess who was Geronimo? Give some credit to Jake Collins; he sure liked to muck around with his weapons. Normally, it holds only ten bullets, but thanks to the wondrous thing that is magic, you loaded seventy rounds into the lever action weapon.

As you squeeze the trigger and fire the first round, you hope this isn't your own Little Big Horn.

Trying to make each shot more accurate than the last, you begin to feel the first telltale signs of the Daemon's aura. The binding rings dampened it significantly. Your hands shake slightly as a feeling of panic starts to build. Bill stops firing momentarily and ignites the inner firewall and activates the wards and the cheering charms. The magic takes the edge off the growing terror.

The Daemon is over halfway through the Inferi. Hack opens up with his enlarged pistol. He manages five shots before the pistol shrinks in his grasp. Two of the bullets causing the first real wounds ripping flesh off of its leg and opening a hole in its stomach.

You work the lever action and no bullet loads. You discard it and draw your wand. Now that it's closer, you want to see if your spells have anymore effect. You snap off a spell chain link in rapid succession.

Only the blasting curse hits and it is ignored by your target – not a very good sign.

Kwan shouts, "Everyone blasting curses together now!"

Three blasting curse streak towards it. All three strike it and it barely stumbles.

It's never too early to try something Unforgivable, "Crucio!"

The Daemon stops for a second and looks at you almost amused, before continuing its forward progress through the Inferi – an even worse sign. To your amazement, Bill sends off a Killing curse. You didn't know that he had it in him! The target dodges, so you don't get to see if it would do anything.

You can feel the presence of the negation field pulling at your magic like a lead weight. You ignore it and continue casting spells with Bill and Kwan. Few of them hit, fewer still cause any damage. Instead of tossing the Inferi to its side like rag dolls, the Daemon is beginning to

hurl them into the ward zone. The energy of the wards roars to life and begins disposing of the zombies.

“Shit! I knew I should have waited to activate the wards.” Bill screams as zombies explode from the wards. The odd thought occurs to you and you make a note, if the two of you survive this, you’ll have to ask him if he has ‘other’ premature problems.

Swallowing hard, you watch the Daemon barrel through the firewalls leaving the decimated horde of Inferi behind and tossing the zombies still clutched in its claws ahead of it. Already the wards which would have normally burned Hack and maybe even Grawp to ashes look feeble and insignificant against the terrifying hellspawn.

The scene is something out of a feverish nightmare. Buffeted by jets of scalding water, burnt by magical fire, shocked, sprayed with acid, and bitten by carnivorous plants – the Daemon pushes forward. You feel the cheering charms fail and the panic that nothing will stop this monster returns in full force.

A crushing kick detonates one of the Purple Armageddon’s. Hack nails it with the first of his miniaturized boulders and knocks it backwards. It scrambles to its feet and scoops up the full sized stone. Hack braces looking like he’s ready to play a bit of dodgeball, but the Daemon hurls the stone into another ward cluster detonating it as well. Seconds later, the last remaining Armageddon is destroyed.

Shockingly, it stops. It stands there in the middle of a field of carnivorous plants letting the ever weakening severing charms hit it - demonstrating its superiority and mocking all of you.

Angered, you banish nearby debris at the hellspawn as Hack throws more boulders. Bill and Kwan follow suit allowing Hack to score two more hits and actually elicit a howl of pain from the creature.

Now out of boulders Hack drinks one of his potions. The occasional crack of De Soto’s rifle continues causing damage like tiny insect bites to the thick skin. You’re running out of debris to banish as it swats a trio of barrels aside like plush toys. The growing troll adjusts his shield, grips his spear and steps off his perch to meet his destiny.

The last wards fail. It's just the five of you against this unholy monster. The panic momentarily incapacitates all of you. Bill takes a couple of steps backward and falls off his perch. Seconds later he stumbles around the side of his makeshift platform looking pale and ashen.

You need to do something! Otherwise, none of you will be able to hold your wands to cast a bloody spell! Happy thoughts! Happy thoughts! Doing victory rolls over an Inferi mob – good enough! A barely corporeal Prongs emerges from your wand tip.

Prongs dashes ahead, sprinting towards the two giant combatants circling each other. It attacks the Daemon who lets out an angry snarl as sideswipes the phantom. You see it shake that hand like it's been stung. Hell, that's just about as much damage as anything else has caused so far. Hack closes and jabs his spear into the Daemon creating an oozing wound on his side. Two of the Daemon arms lock onto the spear and it becomes a tug of war.

Bill and Kwan see how effective your patronus was as a Thestral and an Irish wolfhound leap from their wands. You cast a second patronus as the terror continues to grow. To your immense frustration, it's even more formless. The three patroni disrupt the Daemon enough that Hack is able to wrest his spear back from the monster and immediately score another hit. This time the Daemon is too quick and steps inside of the Troll's guard. Four arms work in devastating succession knocking the spear to the side and viciously clawing Hack. The troll smashes his shield into his opponent's chest creating a jagged wound with the Dragon's teeth embedded in the shield.

The Daemon repays the injury by ripping the shield off of Hacks arm obviously dislocating Hacks arm from his socket. A hoofed leg slams into the troll's gut and sends the bleeding troll across the ground.

You try to summon another Prongs but only mist comes out. Try a different memory. Amy in the shower! Karina snuggled against you! Killing Paulo! It isn't working! Kwan can still summon his Thestral! Hack's potion must have worn off as the Daemon lifts the smaller troll upwards. Hack needs your help!

“Come on Dad! Expecto Patronum!” Nothing comes out this time – not even mist. The Daemon turns its gaze on you and the terror intensifies into a horror you’ve never felt before. James Potter can’t save you. He couldn’t even save himself. Panic overcomes you. You freeze. It’ll all be over in a minute or two. You could activate your Portkey back to the bank, but why prolong the inevitable. You sag to the ground in defeat even as you watch Bill cast another patronus. He needed you to come through and you didn’t. You’re a failure, just like Snape always thought.

That thought strikes something primal in you. You scream in defiance. You will not let it end this way. You will not go out on your knees crying like a bitch! They’re counting on you and there’s only one person that can save you now – there’s only ever been one.

“Expecto Patronum!” The memory is stepping off the plane onto Brazilian soil. The Daemon was right; ‘Freedom’ is a powerful feeling.

Even in the presence of the dampening field, you feel the power as the guardian spirit leaps from your wand. It isn’t the stag. It’s the jaguar. You haven’t been a boy for a long time. You don’t need your father to save you. You’ll save yourself.

Glowing with power the Jaguar races towards the Daemon and captures its attention. Bleeding heavily and impaled by four sets of claws, Hack thrashes to free himself and manages to pull out his ‘tiny knife’ from his belt and drive it up into the Daemon’s chest sending a steaming stream of foul ichor into Hack’s face. The Daemon throws Hack to the ground opening horrible wounds from which the troll struggles to rise.

The hellspawn moves to finish the crawling troll, but your Patronus leaps on the Daemon as the monster rips Hack’s blade free. The spectral jaguar clamps down on the upper arm and claws with both front paws. Kwan’s Thestral rams it in the face Bill’s hound nips at the creature’s legs. The Jaguar fades leaving behind a nasty looking scorch mark and blackened flesh on the Daemons upper left arm. De Soto’s rifle shot rips through the damaged flesh lancing it like a puss filled boil.



The Daemon shakes off the other two patroni and starts heading straight for you. You summon another one feeling the exhausting draw on your energy. You can't stop now. The jaguar leaps down and puts itself between you and the charging Daemon slowing it down.

You notice Kwan off his platform and charging its side, slinging curses from his wand. At less than five meters, he whips the AK-47 around and empties a full clip into the hellspawn ripping into its flesh at close range as your spells impact into it adding to the damage. Your patronus attacks and damages it further, but it's just not enough!

Kwan, casting a spray of acid from his wand, is swept aside by a claw that opens a gaping wound in his stomach and for good measure the Daemon slams its hoof down on his right leg shattering it. White hot rage courses through your body dispelling the fear. You hurl a blasting curse so fueled by rage that it knocks the enormous creature backwards and sends it staggering backwards. Take that motherfucker! The effort causes you to sink to your knees but you can't stop now and you summon another patronus.

You're back on your feet before the Daemon is. Should you use the Mossberg? You're not doing enough damage! What's that in its hand? Kwan's pouch dangles from one of the bloody nails. It just noticed it too and it stopped. It looks confused – even scared as it tries to rip the pouch snared on its finger nails.

Kwan must have boom juice in the sack. "Tonare!"

The concussive blast of energy strikes the pouch dead center just missing the claw that it tried to use as a shield.

The bag explodes, but it seems different from boom juice, much different. The flash blinds you and you stumble off the platform and hit the ground pretty hard. 'So much for the nimble Jaguar Animagus always landing on his feet', you think trying to clear your vision and you groping for your wand.

When your eyes finally start processing images you see something that challenges even a person who believes in magic. A giant spectral bird is fighting the Daemon. Did you summon Fawkes? It's like the

Chamber of Secrets all over again! No, it's not a phoenix. It's an eagle!

The realization hits you like a brick wall. Thundercloud's totem was in the bag. The totem was a part of his life's energy and now it is free.

The giant eagle drives the Daemon backwards and away from the badly injured Kwan. Your patronus attacks it again taking advantage of the disoriented creature. The eagle is beginning to fade, but it swoops towards the stone where Hack had stood and picks up something. The bloodied Daemon turns towards you again only to stumble to the ground pole axed a blast of green energy slamming into its backside from Bill. It turns in anger towards the Cursebreaker, hurling a chunk of rock at him, but quickly starts back towards you.

You can only stare at the eagle in its glory as it drops something at your feet and resumes his attack against the Daemon – a gourd full of growth potion. You experience a second bit of déjà vu as you flashback to your second year battle. For a moment, you aren't sure why Thundercloud gave this to you, but then you realize what you have to do.

As the Daemon tries to drive the fading eagle away, you pull off your Dragonhide vest and kick off your boots. Opening the gourd, you drink as much of the foul potion as you can swallow. As you feel yourself starting to grow and bursting out of your trousers, you cast another patronus, toss your wand to the ground and change into your Jaguar form. Why didn't you think of this before? You're the ultimate predator in this part of the world. It's time to prove it!

You don't really have a means to measure scale, but you must be nearly as large as Fluffy. Strength floods your body. A strange sensation passes through your body as the white mist of your patronus envelopes you, merging with you and revitalizing you. The patronus is a guardian spirit as is the inner animal. It makes so much sense now.

The eagle gives one final screech and fades from view. Almost an encouraging, 'Give it hell kid!'

Both you and the Daemon circle each other. Out of the corner of your eye, you see Bill levitating Kwan out of the way. The Daemon looks at you and speaks, "So we are down to the final two outcomes. Let us see who the victor is!"

It charges with its four arms spread wide. You leap to your right and sprint towards him bounding at the last instant and swiping your mist covered claws.

Like a locomotive slamming into a petrol lorry, the two of you hit. You yelp feeling like a pair of sledgehammers just pummeled your right side and suffering the fiery pain of a claw slicing a wound into your left shoulder.

Your front paws claw away at its chest and neck as you try to get closer to the Daemon's neck. The sound of the protective mist scalding the monster's flesh wherever the two of you touch mixes with its snarls of rage. A fetid smell of bodily fluids assails your nostrils threatening to overwhelm you, but your powerful jaws crush down on its forearm and the bone snaps with a loud crack. Gagging at the taste of whatever it calls blood you wretch, but press on as the momentum of battle carries both of you two the ground.

You and the Daemon are locked in a deadly embrace rolling across the ground. Pumping your back legs and feeling your paws rip open long gashes on its legs as you feel the weight of the beast press down on you.

Pain courses through you as claws dig into your flesh, kicking hard and slashing with your right paw you injure it and push it away from you rolling away from it and coming up unsteadily on your four legs. Both of you bleed from numerous wounds as the circling begins again, albeit with the two of you staggering slightly. Looking much worse for wear, the Daemon's whole front is blackened from contact with your patronus barrier. Its flesh ripped, shredded and oozing bile as both of the creature's left arms hang uselessly to the side

Your senses scream at you to flee as the primal instinct of self-preservation wars with your need to destroy this aberration. Milliseconds too late the Daemon spins and absorbs the blast of

another Killing curse from Bill and backpedals slightly. The most lethal curse known to humans is nothing more than a sucker punch to it! You move to its vulnerable side seeking the opening you need. You have allies. It doesn't and moves to keep its left side away from you waving two claws defensively warning you of the injuries it will inflict if you come closer.

Suddenly, the hellspawn's right eye explodes as a rifle round strikes it cleanly. The Daemon howls and covers its wounded eye with one of the remaining arms. There's your opening! Finish it!

You leap forward once and bound into the air coming down on top of it. Twisting, clawing and biting you attack in a frenzy of energy. The white hot pain of its counter attacks only fuel your need for retribution. Ignoring your own agony, your maw finds the target you've been seeking. Claming down on the Daemon's neck you feel the ache of your teeth and the enormous pressure you put on them. Foul blood fills your mouth from the unnatural meat. You keep crushing and squeezing as your opponent's attacks weaken.

With a startling snap the Daemon's neck breaks chipping some of your teeth as the two of you collapse in a heap. Moments later you shake free of the monster and backpedal before collapsing on your side. The white mist begins to fade and you stare at your blood matted fur breathing raggedly. You convulse spewing the foul blood and flesh of the Daemon on the stone street.

Small red headed meat runs towards you. "Harry change back, I can heal you better in human form!"

You start to comply feeling very lightheaded as the Cursebreaker suddenly starts growing.

The uninjured Bill levitates you back onto the same block as Kwan and levitates Hack onto his block ahead of the advancing group of Inferi that is now inside the newly surging magical firewall. He summons your broom and wand. Telling you to start closing your wounds, Bill works on Kwan for a minute before helping you more of your wounds. He pours a blood replenishing potion down your throat.

"I think Hack's a goner." Bill says sadly.

For some reason, you shake your head. "No. Not yet. He's still alive. Go check him out and get him to safety before that group of Inferi gets to him. I'll keep an eye on Kwan." You drag your tired body over to the badly injured Korean. The sound of rifle fire starts again, as De Soto tries to pick off the approaching zombies.

Bill climbs on the broom, "Okay, look for any wounds I didn't close on Kwan. If I'm not back in two minutes, give him another replenisher. In five minutes, I want you to take a second one. Try and clean off his wounds, but I don't know if he'll keep the leg. I'm not sure even magic can fix it."

As Bill flies off, you look at Kwan's right leg. It's a crushed mess and still barely attached. You almost vomit again, but have nothing left to offer other than a bit of bile. With trembling hands, you lift him into a cradled position and arch his head back pouring a tiny bit of the potion into his mouth making certain that it goes down the right hole before giving him any more. You repeat the process four times and check his airway and breathing afterwards. Shallow and faint, but he's still there. Bill returns and conjures you a blanket. You realize that you are naked. Good thing Kwan's unconscious otherwise he'd be mocking you! Then again, you're alive!

"Don't know how you knew, but you were right. He's still alive. I'm gave him a double dose of blood replenishers and sealed off his worst wounds. I need a pepper up before I work on him some more – be right back. Merlin's big ass enchanted balls, Harry! Unless I use a pensieve and swear on my magic, I don't think anyone's ever going to believe this story!"

You mumble back to him shivering slightly and pulling the blanket tighter, but feeling strangely happy before realizing the cheering charms are working again, "I just want to see that bastard Dumbledore's face afterwards."

He replies with the same sense of false cheer, "You'll get your chance. That's for damn sure."

Despite the oozing wounds that you have to keep closing and the jolts of pain every time your body moves, you feel happy to be alive. You won. “Hey Bill, I wonder what kind of stuff we can carve out of a Daemon’s bones?”

Bill sputters the potion he was drinking and whoops in victory – apparently another victim of the cheering charms, “Now that’s what I’m talking about! I’ve never heard of someone working with Daemon bone before. Hell, after I do my next check on Hack, I’ll see if I can collect some of its blood. Who knows what a real Potions Master would pay for a chance to experiment with some. We might even be able to find a hide-worker that can work that skin into some nasty, badass armor, but the bones, they’re all ours Harry! The best Breakers in the world will be begging us for a finger joint and we’ll make them pay through the nose! Think of all the beautiful schemes that are ours for the taking!”

“Bill?”

“Harry?”

“Go finish cutting its bloody head off! I don’t know if the Necro wards will work on it or not, or if my bite prevented it, but I’d rather not find out.”

“Right you are fellow Cursebreaker! Damn some Inferi are trying to eat our prize Daemon! Shoo! Get away! Keep watching Kwan.” He flies off to tend to the troll and chase a few Inferi away from the Daemon’s carcass, as you wonder if he’s gone off the deep end. If he has, you might join him. It seems like a nice place.

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Author’s Notes - So there you go, I’m extremely proud of this battle as I head off to Orlando for the week. Depending on the amount of loose ends I must clean up will determine if it is a one or two chapter epilogue setting up the sequel to this story, which will be titled 'Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure'. Title by Loverboy - I sure do miss the 80's!

Disclaimer – You’ve been doing this for quite some time now – reminding everyone that you don’t own Harry Potter and that someone with the initials JKR does. Well all good things must come to the end ... in this case it happens to be the story. You’re not sure when her ownership of you lapses. Maybe, you can buy yourself back then?

Acknowledgements – Where would this story be without the inputs of my helpers at Alpha Fight Club? Their contributions made the story much better than I alone was capable of. How about FairyQilan’s beta work? Without them, this story would have still been written, but it would be far less enjoyable. Also, I would like to thank all of you readers for taking the time to follow along. Hopefully, you will find that this story stands the test of being read over and over again.

## Chapter 23 – The Rivers are Full of Crocodile Nasties

September 15th, 1996

“So, the lost scion of the Potter line returns from another harrowing shopping trip to the Colastos estate. Congratulations on staying alive for another week. It must be a slow one if no one’s trying to kill you. How’s Kwan? Did the Healers have any good news this time?”

You roll forward and pull yourself off the ground and look for Bill. You really hate Portkey travel. Maybe it’s the cat in you, but you rarely land on your feet and it’s a tad annoying. Trying to look on the bright side, landing flat on the ground makes you a low profile target for any curses aimed at you.

Paranoia is a lovely thing isn’t it, as you take one step closer to becoming another Moody.... You chide yourself for your poor taste in jokes, given Kwan’s condition.

“The week isn’t over yet and that’s soon-to-be Journeyman Curse Breaker Potter to you, my fellow grave robber. Kwan’s angry as ever. It might have something to do with that creepy German woman Nikolai employs. She seems to be attracted to Asian men. He’s recovering, but they had to take the leg. Colastos’ medical team is fitting him for the best prosthetic leg money can buy. Obviously,

money isn't an issue. He's still going to have a learning curve to teach himself how to walk again – wonder how Barty pulled it off so easily, maybe there's something more to Polyjuice than most people think?"

You pause taking the backpack full of shrunken supplies off and mutter, "I still wish that silver limb spell didn't come with such a nasty surprise. Wonder if Tom ever plans on telling Peter or if he's just going to let the rat drop dead one day?"

Bill nods in agreement, "Yeah, it's a shame. You were getting close to making a functioning limb. Still kind of weird to go up and see all those Inferi wandering around on silver blobs of metal for legs."

The biggest prize other than the Daemon's carcass had been an ornate black metal box, long since deprived of any magic by its proximity to the Daemon. Inside the box was Veras Chilotha's personal grimoire of extremely useful spells and other assorted nastiness. You had hoped to give the Korean a magical replacement for his ruined limb and had even taken to practicing on the Inferi, until you spotted his notes in the margin.

With De Soto's help translating, it soon became apparent why Riddle didn't go into the magical limb replacement business. The metal poisoning will kill the recipient within five years, less if he doesn't use a bezoar on a weekly basis. Somewhere, you hope Sirius is laughing his arse off about this one. Of course, Voldemort might never have gotten around to the notes in the margin part.

You still want to perfect the spell, but Bloodfire and some of the other more potent spells in the collection are much more inviting.

With Kwan's injuries beyond the meager healing skills of those present, you brought him to Nikolai Colastos for some expert care. It was nice to see the outside world, even if it meant that you were now 'Fidelius errand boy' running back and forth. It was also nice to have your wounds tended to by a professional, even if the mediwizard had to reopen them to fix you, but there's a better chance the scars will fade. You could tell the gruff looking man really wanted to ask what caused such vile wounds – especially when it took three times longer than normal to fix your teeth, but money is a wonderful thing. The



right amount can loosen a tongue or it can buy silence with no questions asked, just another lesson Hogwarts could never teach you.

You've been careful to not abuse your debt to the well placed wizard - merely asking him to arrange for the specialists and the secrecy, while you provided the money out of the salvaged chests. Only Nikolai and the Frau have any knowledge of what actually happened in this city.

"How much did Nikolai's silence cost us?"

"I agreed to give him two liters of blood for his experimentation. I know; stop looking at me like that – 'Daemon blood does not grow on bloody trees', but it'll grease the wheels nicely with his brother-in-law, the Minister. Will you quit pouting? We still have eighteen more liters! Do I have to remind you, who killed the damn thing?"

Rubbing the discolored scars on your left arm you continue, "Anyway, I saw Karina. Apparently, she's already 'off the market'. Her role in the family is being engaged to one of Nikolai's nephews. Supposedly, the guy's a decent enough bloke. I didn't get to meet him and quite honestly, it would have been weird. Anyway, she is up and around now. Hell with these contaminated wounds; she's probably in better shape than I am. Chico's the same and was happy enough to see me. They think we ran into some Dark Wizards, which I guess, in a way, we did."

"Well Harry, between the expensive healers and bathing yourself in your Patronus all the time, your wounds look a helluva lot better than they did a few days ago. I still think that you should author a research paper on 'The Healing Powers of the Patronus when Dealing with Cursed Wounds'. Swallowing fresh Daemon blood probably isn't a good thing and it's not exactly like you can go see a mediwitch or wizard and ask them if there are going to be any nasty surprises. It's not exactly something healers are trained for in school."

Nodding with Bill's assessment and imagining the look on Hermione's face if you ever published your findings, you look over at Hack. He's in a worse predicament. Daemon blood sprayed all over his open wounds. They still reopen for no apparent reason and it's been

almost a week since the battle. De Soto keeps a close eye on him and makes liberal use of your stock of healing draughts. They have mixed results on Trolls. You 'bathe' him in your Patronus mist at least three times a day.

You're still a bit angry at the Healer's indignant response at your request that he treat a wounded troll. You decide to change the subject, "How are salvage operations going?"

"Slow. It'll go better now that you're back, move rubble gather money and jewels and look at all the fancy, useless, and broken artifacts that have been drained of all their magic. At least our alabaster friend over there had his little stash and he's giving us that Pensieve and a few of the other useful devices. Of course there's that on the desk." Bill points to the blood stained crystal ball on Chilotha's makeshift throne – Ravenclaw's scrying glass and also Riddle's Horcrux.

Using Hack's knife as a cleaver, the two of you had carved it out of the creature's gut the day after the battle and carefully removed it without touching the cursed object. As a rule, other people's Horcruxes much like other people's wives are strictly hands off. You'd make an exception for Narcissa Malfoy, but only if her husband and son were forced to watch.

Fishing around in the satchel of potions you pull out the healing draughts from Nikolai's infirmary and gesture to De Soto, still marveling at how life-like he looks as the statue moves across the room.

"Thank you, Harry. Good you brought the skeletal regrowth serums. Hack's internal damage still does not register on your diagnostic spells, but we all know it is there. Perhaps, they will help. I admire your devotion to a team member. Most humans would consider a troll a waste of valuable potions."

"He's as much a member of this team as you are. The latest Golden Rule is never give up on a team member as long as they're breathing. Speaking of which, don't you want to come back to civilization with us?"

“My place is here. As soon as you or Bill provides me with a Dragonbone rod with the Reparo charm carved into it, I will begin my long task of mending my city. When we destroy the Fidelius anchor and the Minister brings his people back to my city, I at least wish to have a Ministry building there for him to return to.”

“I’m just hoping I can convince them to wait at least a year to destroy the anchor. I don’t need Riddle to know that one of his Horcruxes is gone.”

The statue rubs its stone beard, probably a habit the real conquistador had. “If memory serves me correctly, it is just under two years until the next election. For maximum impact, he will want to reveal the city a few months from the election. The euphoria of having their capital rediscovered will easily brush off any competition. More importantly, he will not have to explain any detailed plans for reconstruction and the expenses involved until after the election. I recommend mentioning that to him. It should make things much easier.”

It’s easy to see why the statue of Hernando De Soto was a counselor of South American Politicians for centuries. You still wish you could convince him to come back with you. He’s rather good at Potions and much less Snape-like. You have to remind yourself that, according to good old Dumbledore, Snape is supposedly teaching, and you use that term loosely, DADA this year and the Slughorn fellow is now teaching Potions. Yet another good reason to avoid Hogwarts like the plague for as long as you can get away with it.

“Hey Bill, how much longer do you think we can keep Dumbledore waiting.”

Bill shakes his head, “He’s getting rather insistent that you return to England. So far, letting him know that you’re the only one who can go and procure supplies has shut him up. I’ve told him that salvage operations will be wrapped up in another week. It’s really going to take four days. He also doesn’t know that Kwan’s injured. I sort of omitted that from my report on us beating the Daemon. In fact, my whole report on that fight seems to be a bit lacking. He thinks the sapper explosion wounded the thing enough for us to kill it.”

“Naturally, he wants to know where I am getting my supplies too, doesn’t he.”

“Right in one, Harry. I’m sure he’s got Moody and probably a few others watching the marketplaces in Brasilia, Sao Paulo, and Rio with orders to bring you in. He wants you bad.”

“It’s not happening on his terms. My guess is that I’d wake up Obliviated and wondering where my summer went to.” You cringe at the thought.

“I’ve already told him that we’re going to require an Unbreakable Vow that he won’t do that to you. If he tries to have anyone else do it, you’re too strong for it to stick. I know Moody well enough to say that he wouldn’t do it without wanting to know every reason why, but part of me wants to see him try to take you on. I’d sell tickets to that matchup and I bet old Mad Eye would be in for the shock of his life. My money would be on you. He’d underestimate you and you’d overpower him.”

You blush a little at his praise, as he pauses before continuing, “That reminds me. Next time that you go back to your friend’s compound, I want you to get them to owl a message to Moody from me. If he doesn’t already know the reasons why we brought you to Brazil, then he needs to get it from me. If nothing else, it’s bound to make more trouble for Dumbledore.”

Even the statue, who has never met Albus Dumbledore chuckles at this as you and Bill climb onto the flying carpet and head out for another day of moving rocks and recovering money.

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Two days later, you’re sitting in the office of the Brazilian Minister of Magic, Juan Dimperio with Nikolai Colastos is seated next to you. Serena Dimperio, Nikolai’s sister and the head of the Policia de Magia idly regards you as an object of curiosity. You’ve spent a good deal of time in this office with the Dimperios over the last week and have acquired a healthy dislike for paperwork and meetings. Staring

at you with eyes promising pain and death is a group of very irate Goblins.

“Your expedition has a signed agreement with our clans. We demand full access to the site!” The lead Goblin says. He was introduced as Zar. You’re not sure if it is a name or a title. Fourfangs seems to be deferring to him, so he must be one of the most powerful Goblins in this hemisphere.

You had been warned to let the Minister and Nikolai carry the conversations, but that just pressed your last button. “Wait a second! You demand! You demand! You were going to betray us.”

Zar answers baring his fangs, “You have no proof, human. We on the other hand have a signed agreement.”

Exasperated, you look over at the Minister and his wife. “Put them under Veritaserum.”

“It doesn’t work on Goblins.” Serena replies.

“What about Legilimency?”

The Goblin leader snarls in defiance, “The streets will run red with blood before I allow a human into my mind. Is that what you want Minister? Are you prepared for a war?”

The Minister spreads his hands in a conciliatory fashion, “No, of course not honorable Zar. We have coexisted for quite some time without incident. Surely, we can come to a compromise. Perhaps equal sharing of the gold with the Ministry and the expedition?”

Zar hisses back, “Eighty-two percent! It is what was agreed on! Not a knut less or there will be bloodshed!” It’s almost like the Goblins are dead set on creating an incident – like they want a war. Why would he want that? It reminds you of Fudge, desperate to deny something – so desperate that, he would do anything... That’s it!

Your eyes narrow. “My guess is you have your own troubles Zar. Having a spot of ghost trouble, are you? Looking for a distraction for your people?”

Everyone in the room looks at you. Zar’s eyes widened in surprise; it was his only visible reaction, but it’s enough.

“What are you speaking of Mr. Potter?” The Minister asks.

You cross your arms and stare down Zar. “We helped Fourfangs there eliminate a female goblin outlaw and her clan. Unfortunately, she became a ghost. She’s a bit of a political rebel and wants the Goblins to quit the human world. I bet she’s found a lot of ears now that you can’t get rid of her. Bet you wished you left her alone in that valley now!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” Denial – and everyone thinks it’s just a river in Egypt. No matter how many times you hear that, it’s still funny.

“Don’t you see? There are problems down in the Warrens! The clans are restless, aren’t they? A few weeks from now, you might be negotiating with a different leader. Zar needs a rebellion to stay in power. Don’t deny it. You can’t get rid of that many enemies without one. At least you’ve got plenty of Worg, now don’t you? Silly me, I’m sure all of it recovered in the valley was destroyed. Of course you wouldn’t be stockpiling it?”

There, you said it – the dreaded ‘W’ word. De Soto said you should only use it if all else fails. You’re not really sure if things were that bad, but it should move things along.

“The boy’s lying!” Why does everyone always insist that you’re a liar? Petunia started that rumor years ago. Rita, Snape, and a host of others didn’t help matters. The sad part is that you’re not a very good liar.

“Is he Zar? What evidence do you have to support these serious allegations, Mr. Potter?”

“I can provide Pensieve memories, testify to seeing it under Veritaserum, and of course hand you the doses that were provided to the eight Goblins that accompanied us on the expedition. I just happen to have them here with me.” You set the bag on the table. They were going to betray you. You can play that game too! It’s sad to think that, a short time ago; you felt a kinship with Goblins in general!

Checkmate. Even from his distant and hidden cave, Hernando De Soto works a bit of a political miracle and get’s the expedition out of hot water. The Brazilian Ministry wouldn’t back you over a pile of money. They’ve got plenty. In fact, there’s so much money, that it might be dangerous to introduce into the South American economy at one time. You don’t pretend to understand economics, but it made enough sense to you. On the other hand, they would back you over the possibility of war with the Goblins and proof that they are stockpiling Worg. Lucius must live for battles fought like this. Considering Dobby kicked the crap out of him, you’re guessing he’s more suited for these types of situations.

It gives the Minister the out he’s been looking for. The funny part is everyone knows they have Worg, but politics is a strange thing. You understand it even less than economics. Ward crafting is much easier. Killing is much more straightforward. “I would be careful, honorable Zar. If you seek a rebellion, you might end up with a war.”

The accusations fly back and forth between the human and Goblin leadership. You’re quickly reduced to the level of spectator waiting to see the outcome. Fourfangs is not participating. He merely stares at you with an unmasked sneer of hatred. You see his hands clench and wonder if they’ll drift down under the table to the weapons he carries. Go ahead and try it. You’d kill him without a second thought right now.

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When you return to the Bank in the hidden city, Bill isn’t there. He’s out working salvage. Hack’s awake and De Soto is there. The statue looks at you and tilts its head, “You look perplexed, Harry. How did the meeting at the Ministry go?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever really understand politics. One minute the Minister and the Goblins are talking full blown war and by the end of the meeting they’ve got an agreement hammered out.”

“I had thought violence would be unavoidable. I am surprised there will be no bloodshed.”

“Oh, there’s going to be an uprising, just not a war. When the Ministry attacks, they’re going to hit Zar’s enemies, discover a large quantity of Worg, and Zar’s political enemies will pay the price. Apparently, it’s the price in blood to be paid for maintaining the status quo. It makes me bloody sick!” You feel so dirty wondering how many humans and Goblins will die for this staged little war.

The statue huffs, “For some, politics is a necessary evil – a means to an end. For others, it is an addiction. Compare it to your chosen profession of Cursebreaking. At least you Breakers wait for a person to be buried before trying to rob their vaults. Politicians do it while they’re still alive.”

It takes a minute to digest what he is saying, but it makes sense and momentarily lightens your mood. You turn to the Troll, “How are you doing buddy?”

“Bumps on back turn into tiny wings. Skin around the wounds all funny. Funny lumps on my arms. See?”

Hack turns on his chair and you can see a tiny set of bat wings on his back. He can even make them flap awkwardly. Sure enough the skin on his stomach seems to be healing more like leathery scales and the bumps on the wrist are noticeable if you know where to look for them. You’re worried for him. Bill’s worried for him. He seems to be taking on some Daemonic traits. This naturally has you worried about yourself, but all your wounds seem to be under control, but you’ve taken to checking your body for any strange lumps.

You try to be reassuring, as you pick up the rod you are finishing for De Soto. When it is done, the rod will allow the statue to repair things by touching the rod to a broken item and touching the rune scheme



on the handle. No wonder Bill's father was always fascinated by Muggle tools, when one enchanted object can do the same thing.

"Don't worry, buddy. I think the girls will dig the tiny wings. You could get all the girl trolls now. It's not too late; you don't have to come with us?"

"Hack go with Harry." It's more a statement, as opposed to a question.

"I don't think so." You say sadly.

"No, Hack go with Harry." The Troll repeats. "Puny Harry needs Hack. Hack certain of it."

It's not like Hogwart's hasn't had Trolls in it before, so why not? After all, you filled out at least five forms to make it happen. This time, if there's a troll in the dungeons, it'll be your troll! Before you answer, Bill returns. You quickly recount the latest details and he agrees that Harry Potter – Friend of the Goblins just isn't going to happen in this lifetime.

"I've rigged a time delay to bypass the Fidelius anchor at the Ministry building. It's some nifty work, if I do say so myself. The timer counts down and the bypass cuts off the power to the Fidelius runes. The nice part is they feed back into the skyline display. I've also shown De Soto how to manually activate it. I knew that they needed a reservoir of power to keep that monster powered. They linked it to that one. I also found the remains of the Master Necro Ward in the Temple ruins. Someone's going to have the awful job of going around the city and dispelling the runes. Glad it won't be us!"

"Good, because I think we need to get out of South America. My guess is Fourfangs has already let it slip that I'm in South America. Bounty hunters and Death Eaters will be on their way, if they aren't here already."

"Well that's bound to happen if you screw over the Goblins. They don't take that sitting down. We'll leave the rest of the salvage to the Ministry when they take over the city. I'm ready to get out of here and see the sunshine again. Did the Minister agree to our terms?"

You nod, "Yes. The city stays hidden for one more year. They get half the gold and whatever else is here and provide us safe escort out of the country. They've already got Collins and Thundercloud's bodies on their way back to their families. Dimperio is going to a portion of the Ministries share to the Goblins after their little fake rebellion is over, so that piece of shit Zar can stay in power. The upside of all this is that Minister Dimperio said he will personally keep Dumbledore out of our hair."

"Not too bad. We get out of here with half the booty and most of the magical artifacts. We can be packed in out of here in a few hours. We'll head north to give the families of the fallen their cut and pay our respects to our comrades. You want to try destroying the Horcrux now?" Pointing his wand at his area, he mumbles a packing spell. You do the same and watch as all the objects begin to sort themselves out and fill the open trunks.

"Sure, your Killing Curse or mine?" How the folks in England would be shocked at hearing how casually their savior bantered about the use of Dark Magic?

"Well, it's a crystal ball. How about we take it up on the carpet to the ceiling and give it a little push and let gravity do the work for us. The object still has power, but I think any protections placed on it have probably been drained by the Daemon. If that doesn't work, we'll do it your way."

You're always up for some time in the air and a few short minutes later, you and Bill are standing on the old carpet near at the top of the cave. The scrying glass is on the other end of the carpet like a dangerous creature no one wants to touch.

Bill shrugs, "Is this one of those occasions where we should say something or should we just toss the bloody thing off the carpet?"

"I vote toss. Shit! Look! It's glowing."

"Wands out you reckon?" You freeze in your tracks when Bill says that and a huge lump appears from nowhere in your throat.

Less than a meter away from you the crystal glows and you see the old and wrinkled face of a crone. Her once long flowing black hair had faded to gray and penetrating hazel eyes look upwards and meet with yours. Ravenclaw sure let herself go compared to the pictures in the books. Professor Flitwick even brought the dormant painting of her that hangs in the Ravenclaw common room for a lecture on charms associated with magical paintings once. That picture had made you think of an older Millicent Bulstrode. Sorry Mille, a thousand years ago, you might have been a fetching bride ...

"I have but a moment to give my message to ye, Chosen One. Look into the glass and see the final three items ye must destroy. Two ye have already touched with thine own hands. Look now and behold the objects ye seek."

The visage of the old woman morphs into first a magnificent chalice and next into an intricate locket with an ornate 'S' embossed on it. You've seen it before, but where? The final item appears and both you and Bill look at each other in amazement. Only someone as arrogant as Riddle would do that! The crone's sad face reappears in the crystal ball.

"Think and ye will remember the locations of two. Helga's goblet will be the surest test of ye skills. It will be found ..."

The image changes, it's an all too familiar image with glowing red eyes. "No! I control this object. I will not let you tell them. I tell the future, boy, and I say you will fail! You will die! You will suffer! You have no hope."

"Tough talk from such a fragile little glass ball, Riddle. Let me show you my penalty kick!" Taking a mighty step, you put foot to crystal and send it off the side. It falls the nearly two hundred meters into courtyard exploding into hundreds of pieces in a powerful flare of magic.

Doing your best rabid football fan imitation, you throw your arms up in the air and scream like the announcers on the telly, "Gooooooooooal! Another piece of Tom Riddle is destroyed. Goooooooooal!"

Just to be sure the two of you fly down and check anyway.

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"Hello Moody. Thanks for meeting with us." Bill says over the din of the busy International Portkey terminal. Twenty days into the month of September and you're still nowhere near a school in Scotland. Not that you're complaining.

"Bill, Potter. Nice Troll you got there. My eyes can see through the glamours. All your disguises should hold up to most scrutiny. Nice charms work. You know the old man's going to throw a fit, when you don't show up at the Brazilian Ministry for your reunion."

You chuckle and shake your head at your former professor, "I have a letter for you to give him along with the pieces of Ravenclaw's Scrying glass."

The former Auror takes the parchment. You see him mouth the words as he reads it to himself

Dear Dumbledore,

I suppose you are disappointed in me. I'm afraid I've let you down again. You'll have to forgive the impulsiveness of youth. Sadly, I find that I cannot in good conscience accompany you to England at this moment. As a show of good faith, I will let you know that I will return to England. Though I don't particularly like it, I realize that we still need to work together.

Make no attempt to follow us and I'll return in the first week of October. I want some time to myself and a chance to mourn my fallen friends. Make an attempt and I make no promises about what I will do, but I can promise you I won't go quietly. And as a last warning: if you're still considering obliviation, I know what the final 3 Horcruxes are and I've got a good idea where 2 of them are right now. For the 'lesser good' of my own personal safety, I won't be divulging this information until I receive your Unbreakable Vow.

Harry”

Moody grimaces, “I approve of yanking Dumbledore’s chain. You even managed to get his condescending style, nicely done. He needs to be taken down a notch every once in a while, but you’re playing a game with everyone’s lives boy.”

“No that’s the Old Man’s act. I’m just trying to live my life. Here’s the box with the remains of Ravenclaw’s crystal ball. We should go soon; being seen with you won’t help our disguises.”

“Giving marching orders now are you? Awful cocky, Potter, but I’d be too if that’s really Kwan Chang-Ho behind that column with his wand trained on me.” You see a modicum of respect in the Auror’s one good eye.

“I also have six Brazilian Aurors watching our conversation. They’re our escort out of the country. They chased all the bounty hunters out of here a few hours ago.”

“Nice preparations there Potter. Shows you’re learning. You’ll need to keep your wits about you, if you’re going to stay one step ahead of everyone who’s after you. I’ve got an old classmate in the Magical Creatures Department. I’ll get your Troll registered before you arrive. Less fuss that way. You might want to consider coming back to England the Muggle way. The magical ways all seem to have people watching these days. Here’s my daughter’s telephone number at Scotland Yard. Ring her and she’ll get in contact with me. If need be, I can have a group of Order members meet you or head out and be a distraction while you sneak in. I’ll tell them it’s Dumbledore’s orders.”

Everyone gets a good laugh before Bill brings the conversation back to a more serious note. “Thanks. We might not need it, but it doesn’t hurt to have a backup plan. Who is behind the Bounty Hunters?”

“Octavius Nott is the one calling the shots. He’s got nearly as much money as Malfoy and hasn’t got that whole ‘wanted criminal’ thing hanging over him. Officially, there’s no reason. He wants you delivered to him for your safety is all he’s saying. Unofficially, you’d be in enemy hands as fast as he could Portkey you out of there. Step

carefully from here on Potter – you too, Weasley. Everyone knows you're traveling together now. I'd watch out for them and your mother if she ever catches up with you. Congratulations on your engagement, to that little Delacour girl. Just remember that they might try and use her against you."

Bill smiles, "Thanks for the warnings. Fleur knows the score. She can take care of herself. Mum needs to worry more about what I have to say to her when I catch up to her. Everyone else, we'll take them as they come. They might be in for a shock."

Moody looks only mildly convinced and that's only because Kwan's with you. "Well then, I'll be off. No need for any wands. Stay safe, laddies."

You watch him clank off carrying the remnants of the Horcrux. The Aurors stationed around the lobby escorting you visibly relax probably a bit scared of taking on a legendary fighter like Moody. Fortunately, even legendary fighters know when the odds are stacked against them. It's the difference between legendary and dying in a blaze of glory and probably how Moody got to be this old.

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Beneath the poster of Tone Loc promoting the new and improved 'Funky Cold Medina' – now attracting twenty percent more 'honeys', you wait for the Portkey to take you from Las Vegas to the Sioux reservation. It's a time for you to reflect on the past eight days. September will be gone in a day or two and October is coming. Your life always gets a bit sticky in that month. It's your least favorite month of the year for so many reasons, it isn't worth going into.

The ceremony for Maria Sanchez was an elaborate affair. She may have been a foul mouthed, ugly and surly woman, but she was well known and in her own way loved. Most of her family was only given vague details. Her husband and two children were allowed to watch the Pensieve memory of her death. You didn't want to see it again, but you did it anyway.

Hell, you were shocked she had a husband.

Privately, Bill returned Maria's personal affects and her share of the treasure including the 'fair compensation' for copying her ward schemes.

It made you see her in a different light listening to people say kind words about her. In the end, much like Sirius, you wished you could have known her better.

In stark contrast, Jake Collins' funeral was only attended by his two sisters and the four of you. During the quiet service, you began to wonder what your funeral would be like. Would it be a massive event like Maria's or just a handful of people standing around a patch of dirt and not wanting to be the first to leave? A man in his early forties, like Jake, should have had more people in his life. Hell, even his sisters didn't seem that upset!

Kwan signals that he has the Portkey and the three of you move to join him. It's still surprising that Hack is with you, but he refused to return to work for 'tiny goblins who betray friends' and the market for unemployed Trolls in South America is not very good, though with a small Goblin rebellion set to start, things would pick up quickly. It's funny though, Hack just assumes he is coming along and no one has contradicted him since you tried. Tucked in amongst your various papers provided by Minister Dimperio is a permit to employ and transport a magical creature across International borders. You had to declare him in Honduras and here in Vegas.

"Anything to declare?"

"Uh yes, he's a Jungle Troll under employ as a bodyguard. Here are his papers." It seems rather ridiculous, but then again your life has never been normal has it?

"Remove the glammers. Are his shots up to date?" More paperwork changes hands as the processing wizard looks Hack over like a livestock inspector. Never once does he speak directly to Hack only to you.

“Fee for transporting a Class Two creature into the jurisdiction of the American Wizarding Congress?” Five galleons counted out and you get a receipt to add to Hack’s paperwork. The ironic part is no one bothers to mention the shrunken chest filled with Daemon hide, blood, and bones, nor all the gold and other objects being transported. Then again, with the credentials you are currently traveling under, you could have a shrunken Inferi horde with you and they’d still have to let you in, though you’d have to pay for them just the same. Maybe, you’ll do that next time.

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A pull at the navel later and you are at the Lakota Reservation Portkey Area and Cultural Heritage Museum. This funeral will be different. You feel you owe Thundercloud.

The Museum has a nice rustic look to it with displays of artifacts, magical paintings of ceremonies and complete with comfortable chairs and a small concession area.

The area is deserted, but two bored Caucasian men catch your eye. One looks familiar, though your best look at them was through a bathroom stall in Las Vegas weeks ago. Kwan’s spotted them too. One of them taps something on his belt and five more people Apparate in. Everyone’s wands are out. Hack moves slightly ahead of you on your left. You know what he’s going to do, if necessary. The Sioux Bill was speaking with merely steps backwards and disappears into a back room. You hope it’s to summon help, but the others seem to be in no hurry, so you doubt it.

For a moment no one speaks. One of the two bounty hunters you recognize starts. “We’re only here for the boy. No one else has to get hurt.”

Kwan replies, “Boy is with me. Leave.”

The stocky black haired wizard you remember being named Sean continues, “We’ve got the numbers. No need for it to get messy. Just hand over the Potter boy and all of us walk away nice and friendly



like.” To the others he says, “Keep an eye out for Collins. He might be moving around disillusioned.”

One of the unknown hunters answers with an Eastern European accent. “No, I would sense his presence. Three are Wizards. That one is a Troll, but its aura is different from any Troll I’ve ever seen.” He’s gaze fixes on you. He does a confused double take and you see him visibly gulp and take a slight step back. You know something, it’s about damn time someone took a look at you and got a little frightened. Vernon used to listen to that one American comedian. You’re the Rodney Dangerfield of the Magical World. ‘You don’t get no respect!’ The pair on the right is standing too close together. A fire whip, fast enough and big enough, could get both of them. You wouldn’t happen to know someone powerful enough to do that, would you? Wait for it.

An attractive black witch, who is about to be the recipient of your spell, seemingly ignores the tension in the room. Tapping her wand on other palm, she laughs in a melodic voice, “I just can’t believe one of Ivan’s crazy hunches finally paid off. Everybody else is Apparating like crazy to Brazil and, hot damn, we get the big payday! I was getting tired of memory charming my landlord!”

Ivan hisses and cuts her off, “Not now Kendra.”

Sean looks worried at the one called Ivan. “Talk to me. What do you see?”

Kwan answers for him with a wide grin. “He’s an aura reader! A very rare talent – go ahead tell them what you see.”

“The Korean is more powerful than any one of us, but Sean’s right. We have the numbers to take him. Something is wrong with one of his legs. The other one is not of any real consequence either. Potter is dangerous. If we do this, we need to take the boy down first.”

This draws an indignant snort from Bill. Of course, you’ve seen your favorite Weasley by miles wind up the big green blast of death, so go ahead and overlook him. Bill might have a few surprises in store for them.

“Banged up might reduce the bounty.” The other one you recognized from Vegas cautions.

“Charlie, shut up! Ivan, are you serious?”

“Most powerful aura I’ve ever been this close to. Fight will be messy. I don’t like our chances.”

Kwan laughs, “They’ll have to try and stun you. The Bounty is for you alive. You don’t have to play nice. If stupid Bounty Hunters want to play, kill them quickly like you did Collins and those Brazilian Aurors.”

Technically, that’s a lie on Kwan’s part. Kwan finished his ex-partner off, but they don’t need to know that. Now the leader looks as worried as the aura reader. The others are looking around nervously wondering what they’ve gotten into. Kwan making light about you killing his partner and an unspecified number of Aurors certainly adds a level of confusion to things.

“Sean, c’mon he’s just a kid. Don’t listen to all that crazy aura shit! I got a score to settle with Kwan personally.” You remember something about Kwan putting Charlie in the hospital at some point.

Amid the voices fighting for attention, you hear Kwan promise, “Then, I make sure you die this time.”

One of the others chimes in, “I say we go for it. I was there when Ivan did his little trance thing. He said we’d hit the big time if we were here, right here and now!”

“Not helping Carson! You sure you’re not seeing trick light tricks or glammers?”

The European shakes his head and the standoff continues. Ivan and Sean have their wands on you. Most everyone else is aiming for Kwan. Bill must be slightly perturbed. Then again, you’ve seen him wind up a Killing Curse so these greedy bastards might be overextended. Wait a minute. Greedy bastards! They are a bunch of greedy bastards, looking for big money!

There's a logical solution to this. You ask, "How much to hire the lot of you?"

Several voices respond, "What?"

"You heard me. You're looking for the 'big time' right. Well I've got plenty of money and a burning need to harm a man named Octavius Nott. How much to see his mansion burnt to the ground and his head on a pike outside it? For his own safety of course..." Okay, you're a bit bloodthirsty, but the man has bounty hunters all over the world looking for you.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

"Riddle's got his Death Eaters. Dumbledore has his little group. The Ministry has their Aurors. I'm behind on people and I've got the coin to spend. Are you all any good?"

"We found you."

"Okay, so Ivan there is good and you at least listen to him. Hell, he was right a month or so ago when he said I was on the Reservations."

"How did you know that?"

"I was in the loo there in Vegas, when you and Charlie there were moaning about not finding me."

"Who's Lou?"

"English word for bathroom, Dave. Not important. Bounty for you is ten thousand galleons."

"Kwan, you want to handle the negotiations? This is more your thing." You lower your wand slightly, enough to be noticed, but your reflexes are faster than they could imagine.

The Korean nods. "Three up front, binding magical papers, and the rest when the target is destroyed." Nice euphemism for killing a man...

"Half up front. No papers. Fifteen for the whole job, pissing on Death Eaters adds to the risk." Negotiations at wandpoint, every teenager gets to do this, right?

"Half up front with papers. Twelve is generous enough."

"Fine twelve. Half up front, papers, and an extra point five to rent a Breaking crew."

Bill chimes in. "I can get you the ward schemes for Nott's mansion. I know the crew that did it. One of them owes me. If he doesn't want to honor it, I know where he keeps his records. Either way, it won't be a problem."

Sean nods his head, "Fine, if the schemes aren't exact, one point five penalty."

"They will be." Bill has a certainty in his voice that leaves little room for doubt.

"Deal. Option for follow-on work?"

"Deal. If we're satisfied, there will be more work, but add a two year 'No Turncoat' clause." It was a good idea having Kwan do this. You have no idea what the hell they are saying.

"Fine, no working for the other side. Standard retainer fees apply after the job. Ivan and Thomas, stay with me. The rest of you fall back to our recovery zone. I'll summon you when we are ready to sign the papers. One of you goes with as a token of good faith."

"I'm staying, Sean."

"The fuck you are Charlie! You're looking for a fight. I'm looking out for the crew's best interests. When you're running the Op, you can call the shots. Until then, go - now!"

Realizing they won't take a Troll, Bill volunteers to be your side's gesture of good faith. The remaining people in the lobby lower their wands as Kwan and Sean draw up the papers.

Twenty minutes later, you've just hired seven bounty hunters to kill a man you've never met and anyone else at his house that draws a wand. Then they'll burn his mansion to the ground. You've just bought a man's death, just to send a message to Riddle's followers. The human in you misses your innocence. It was worth far more than the six thousand galleons you just paid them. The problem with 'necessary evils' is that on some level, they're still evil.

In the end, predators should be left alone and not provoked. Goodbye Octavius Nott – rest in peace.

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Things change. You either keep up or fall behind. The next few days pass in a blur. Things stand out in your mind, the massive bonfire they cremated Thundercloud on, the outpouring of grief from friends and family of the old Sioux Animagus, and the looks of shock on the face of Thundercloud's daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughters coming out of the Pensieve after witnessing the fight against Chilotha and the Daemon.

You thought about what to say to them. "When you speak of him, tell them that the Great Eagle helped destroy a Daemon and save thousands of lives. Maybe, this was the legend about the Eagle and the Jaguar? I know it is virtually meaningless, but on behalf of the Minister and citizens of Brazil, I present the Medallion of Tiradentes – the highest honor in their land and the mark of a true hero. It will be a year before our exploits become known, but the people of Brazil and beyond will know that he was a hero."

Lone Thundercloud's daughter Wind, with tears streaming down her face, accepts the beautifully crafted amulet. Yours is somewhere buried in your trunk. The gesture must mean something to her because she pulls you into a hug and sobs freely into you until her husband pries her off of you.

Lauren corners you moments later. "So, James Black doesn't exist and you're really Harry Potter."

"I'm afraid so. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Not disappointed, just surprised. We'll talk later. First, you have to tell me more about my Grandfather. You probably know more about him than I ever did. He was always distant about his past. It's horrible that he's gone, but what is even worse is that there is so much about him I never knew."

You return to the celebration of a long life, which ultimately was not long enough. For a brief time there is no Voldemort. There are no Horcruxes with Daemonic guardians. There is no prophecy for you to fulfill. There is only the company of people united in remembering their loss. Hours later, you find Lauren Starless Sky and the two of you talk late into the night. Laughter and tears are mixed together equally. Eventually, she leads you to her room.

You're still a bit leery about all of this. "I promised I would return and I have. If you really want to do this, convince me."

"I want to believe in destiny. You were destined to meet my Grandfather and come here. You became a mythical Animagus and fulfilled a legend. If destiny, myth, and legend all exist, then there is a higher meaning to life. I want that meaning in my life. I know this is the right thing."

That's good enough for you. Just one last thing, you take both of her delicate hands and look into her eyes. "Lauren, I have enemies. If they find out, they will come for you and your family. I won't refuse you, but you have to know the danger. Just today, seven bounty hunters found us. We made them a counter offer and no one died, at least not yet."

"I will tell only my parents. I am returning to my job in two days. I will tell my friends in New Salem that the father is here on the reservation. My parents will tell those in tribe that the father is back in New Salem."

You taste a hint of her tears on her lips. Hands wander on their own accord. Breathing becomes strained and she releases you. The short yet buxom witch motions for you to make yourself comfortable and you watch for the next twenty minutes as she brews a potion. When completed, she pours it to a goblet and brings it to her mouth. Fighting what must be an awful taste, she drinks it in a series of gulps.

“When the danger is over, I’d still like to be a part the child’s life.” It’s nice to hear you being so optimistic. It sounds better than, ‘If I somehow manage to live through this...’ You doubt Lauren’s child would ever grow up under the conditions you did, but it’s not a chance you’d care to take.

She smiles at you and removes her dress, “It’s not normally done, but I’d like that. Are we talking or stalling? You’ve heard the saying, ‘Never get in the way of a determined witch.’ This will go much easier with your cooperation. You would like to cooperate wouldn’t you?”

Cooperation is a good thing. Most of the time, you’re a loner, but even you can see the benefits of being a team player. Watching her bra float to the ground like a feather, you can really appreciate the benefits...

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You’ve been awake for about thirty minutes. Lauren isn’t and you are trying not to move too much. It might have felt like the right thing to her, but in the light of the morning, it still feels like a bit of a mistake. Young and innocent were once words that meant something to you. You’ve certainly become jaded, haven’t you? You like Lauren, but liking her, impregnating her and leaving is another story altogether. Still, of all the people who have been trying to get a ‘piece of you’, Lauren’s probably the one you respect the most. Eager for a distraction, you use your Breaker specs and examine the runic charms stitched into Lauren’s bra. It’s impressive work – no doubt professional quality. What the heck? You already have a stash of nail polish; you might as well learn how to sew.

You bat it into the air like a partially inflated balloon and let it drift back down before swatting it again. This continues for a bit before a voice interrupts you.

"I can tell you where to get your own if you like? They're a bit on the pricey side, but worth every galleon." Lauren chuckles. Her eyes are full of mirth.

"Just testing the charm work," you say. She reaches over and knocks it back up into the air and the two of you play a game with it.

"It's Victoria's Actual Secret. It lifts, firms, supports, changes color, and is practically weightless – 'Racy Lacy Number Seven.' It's the most heavily enchanted piece of lingerie on the market. The stitching is pure Veela hair."

"You forgot to mention the subtle 'Notice Me' charm I spotted there."

"Good eyes. Well, what else should I call my attention to? That I'm short? Guys are always staring down at the twins. I might as well make certain that the show is worth it." She snatches it out of the air and gestures to the center of each cup. "Since you're so interested, did you see this scheme?"

"The interest is purely academic. Some kind of voice activated scheme. What does it do?"

"Put your finger right there. The current activation phrase is 'a blizzard in Florida.' Wait for it. Do you feel it?"

"The fabric turns cool. What does, oh! I get it!" Understanding dawns on you. Magic is an incredible thing.

"My little black dress, trusty Racy Lacy Number Seven, and a snowstorm in the sunshine state can get me into every night club with free drinks from Boston to New York City."

"You're a naughty little Astronomy teacher aren't you?"



She pinches you on the rump and laughs, “Oh, you have no idea! Now, I’m going to go get cleaned up. In about ten minutes, I’ll be in the shower in the bathroom down the hall. I might be lonely in there. You could come join me, if you’d like?”

The young woman climbs out of bed and slowly moves across the room allowing you to enjoy the show. Who knew putting on a bathrobe could be so erotic? She’d definitely get by without the ‘Notice Me’ charm. When the obvious distraction has left the room, you notice is that your trunk never made it to your designated room. It somehow made its way up here.

You open the trunk and start rooting around for a fresh set of clothes. Tomorrow, much of Lauren’s family will be escorting her back to New Salem in a show of family support. A fresh set of glammers on the group and Phoenix Expeditions will blend in nicely. You’ll catch a flight out of Logan International back to England a day later.

You move a pair of pants looking for a nicer set of trousers. A faint light catches your eyes and you look for the source. It’s your journal. A pang of anger rises in your chest and you almost bury it, but just as you said to Luna – your curiosity wins out. You wrote only a single message after the battle with the Daemon.

Dear Luna,

We won. We’re banged up, but nobody died.

Harry

On the opposite page is her long awaited reply.

Dear Harry,

You really know how to stick it to a girl, don’t you? I’ve been a wreck for the past three days after reading all this and trying to work up the courage to respond. I had to fake an illness just to be left alone wallowing in my misery. I couldn’t even keep up ‘Looney’.

I'll start by offering you an apology. I'd like to do it again, in person. I've been positively awful to you and you were brutally honest, in a clumsy trip over yourself constantly manner, but you were right. I needed to see the things you were writing. I wasn't ready then, but it's not easy to look in the mirror and realize that I am being a complete idiot.

Next, I'll thank you. I took your advice and mentioned Daddy's problems with the Ministry within ear shot of the Weasley twins and a few days later, the pressure on the paper and my life in general eased up. They've increased Daddy's dosage on his potions, but he's getting better.

I suppose I should answer the questions of 'why now' and 'when did you grow up'? It begins with a visitor to the school three days ago. Having successfully purged you from my life, I was enjoying my existence annoying my classmates and living in blissful ignorance. I believe you are well acquainted with a certain Fleur Delacour.

She was rather displeased with me. It neared the point of physical violence. After listening to her reasons, I was also displeased with my actions. In her own special way, Fleur encouraged me to extract my head from my anal regions and stop being such a little bint. I won't go into specific details, but suffice to say I felt as low as a flobberworm when she was done with me.

The one passage that warrants repeating is her telling me, "If you persist in being such an imbecile, I will marry Bill and take Harry for a lover until my sister is old enough for him and I will be the happiest witch in all of Europe!"

I believe she got a bit carried away with herself, but it had an impact on me. I don't know if I ever 'had you' to 'lose you', but that's what it feels like – like I made one of the worst choices in my life and voila, Luna gets a lesson in what it's like to grow up.

I ran back to my room and dug out the journal buried in my trunk. You're out there fighting to save yourself and the world and I can't even see past my wounded pride to spare you a kind word. I'm whining about my little adolescent feelings of betrayal and you're in

life or death situations. Your letters were so raw and honest. If you were aiming for horrible all-consuming guilt and tears soaking everything in sight, you succeeded with full marks.

Okay, I'll stop being such a drama queen. Of course, I'd like to know more about your adventures, but I'll wait until I can ask you in person. You are returning to Hogwarts at some point?

Sincerely,

Luna

PS - After fretting for a time over all the things I wrote above, I remembered a promise to keep you up to date on the happenings here in England. If you want detailed gossip, let me know, but here's the quick summary.

There's trouble in Ron and Hermione land. They were sort of together at the beginning of the year, but it didn't last at all. I was expecting a big fight, but it didn't happen – or at least, I never heard about it. Ron resigned as a Prefect and was replaced by Dean Thomas.

Hermione's fared worse. She's lost a good deal of weight and looks a frightful mess. It's one of those cases of 'be careful what you wish for'. The first sixth year to be named Head Girl really didn't go over that well with the seventh years. Most make a point of ignoring her, though some go out of their way to give her problems. Some have taken to calling her "Percy Weasley, Junior".

Cho was one of the ringleaders, making our Head Girl's life miserable along with the Sneak, but lately you're confusing the hell out of Miss Chang. I heard her crying in frustration in the common room while I was in my own funk. You've had two Ravenclaws completely flustered lately.

That's right I said you. There are at least two people playing you, probably using Polyjuice and that hair you left behind. One of them, my guess is Charlie Weasley, seems to have a thing for Cho. The other one(s) don't and it's rather hilarious to watch. Cho's never been

the most emotionally stable girl, and currently, Harry Potter is sending her off the deep end with his mixed messages.

You've been laying low this year. Your Quidditch ban was lifted, but you're not sure if you want to play. You still hang out with Ron most of the time. It's weird looking over at you and knowing that it isn't really you. Malfoy must know something. He doesn't go out of his way to provoke you. There isn't a DA this year, which is kind of sad. If you are coming back, maybe the real Harry Potter will reconsider this.

Ginny, well she seems to have moved on and is dating Dean Thomas. They seem like a happy couple. Hope you're not jealous? No ugly monster rearing in your chest or anything? I didn't think so.

Well, that's all I have for now. If there is any specific bit of gossip you've been wondering about, just ask and I'll tell you if I know or make up a clever story if I don't. I don't even know if you even care about these things anymore. In private, I'll be Luna, a very shy girl. Looney can still come out and play in public, but I'll take that first step. Problem is - I don't know how to be Luna in public.

Thank you for reading this. I'm not sure if I deserve another chance to be your friend, but if you're in a generous mood, I'll take what I can get and be grateful.

You grab something to write with off Lauren's nightstand and quickly scribble in the journal.

Dear Luna,

I'll be back soon, though I have a few surprises in store for everyone. Sorry no free previews, but I'm living my life on my terms now. It was good to hear from you, though I almost didn't open it when I saw it glowing. I'm glad I did.

You don't have to ask for a chance to start fresh. I think I already asked for that several letters ago. Hopefully, we'll be better in person.

I won't lie and say that it didn't hurt, when you weren't writing back. It still does, but being friends means ignoring bruised feelings and

remembering what made us friends in the first place. You went with me to the Department of Mysteries. Deeds count more than words. I've spent enough time around politicians lately to realize that it's what we do that's important and not what we say or write.

Thanks for all the news from school. I'll have some more questions for you later. It'll be a week or so before I actually show up and it would help to know more about the situation that I'm walking into.

I'll have to ask Fleur about her comments. I don't know if I can be her 'other man', when I'm Bill's best man.

Sincerely,

Harry

Lauren's alarm rings and immediately switches over to one of the local rock stations. You hear the last few lines of Tull's 'Bungle in the Jungle'. It's always been one of your favorites and it was a bit of a theme for the summer. Perhaps, the next song will be a clue to what's coming next in your life? Then again, England is just a different kind of jungle.

The disc jockey's voice picks up at the end of the song, "Oh that get's the blood pumping. This next one goes out to all the people feeling a bit oppressed. Feeling kept down by the man? Well here's Loverboy's 'Turn Me Loose'. Crank up the bass on this one!"

You hum the chorus as you head down the hall. There's a witch waiting to have her back washed – among other things. Maybe it's fate sending you a sign, but like the song says – you've got to do it your way, or no way at all. It's time to turn you loose ...

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Author's Notes – To be concluded in Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure. I've really enjoyed writing this. Thank you for reading. I will probably start work on the sequel after I complete my other story. As always, discussion on Darklordpotter and the Fanfictionauthors forms.